



Jean Baudrillard

FATAL STRATEGIES

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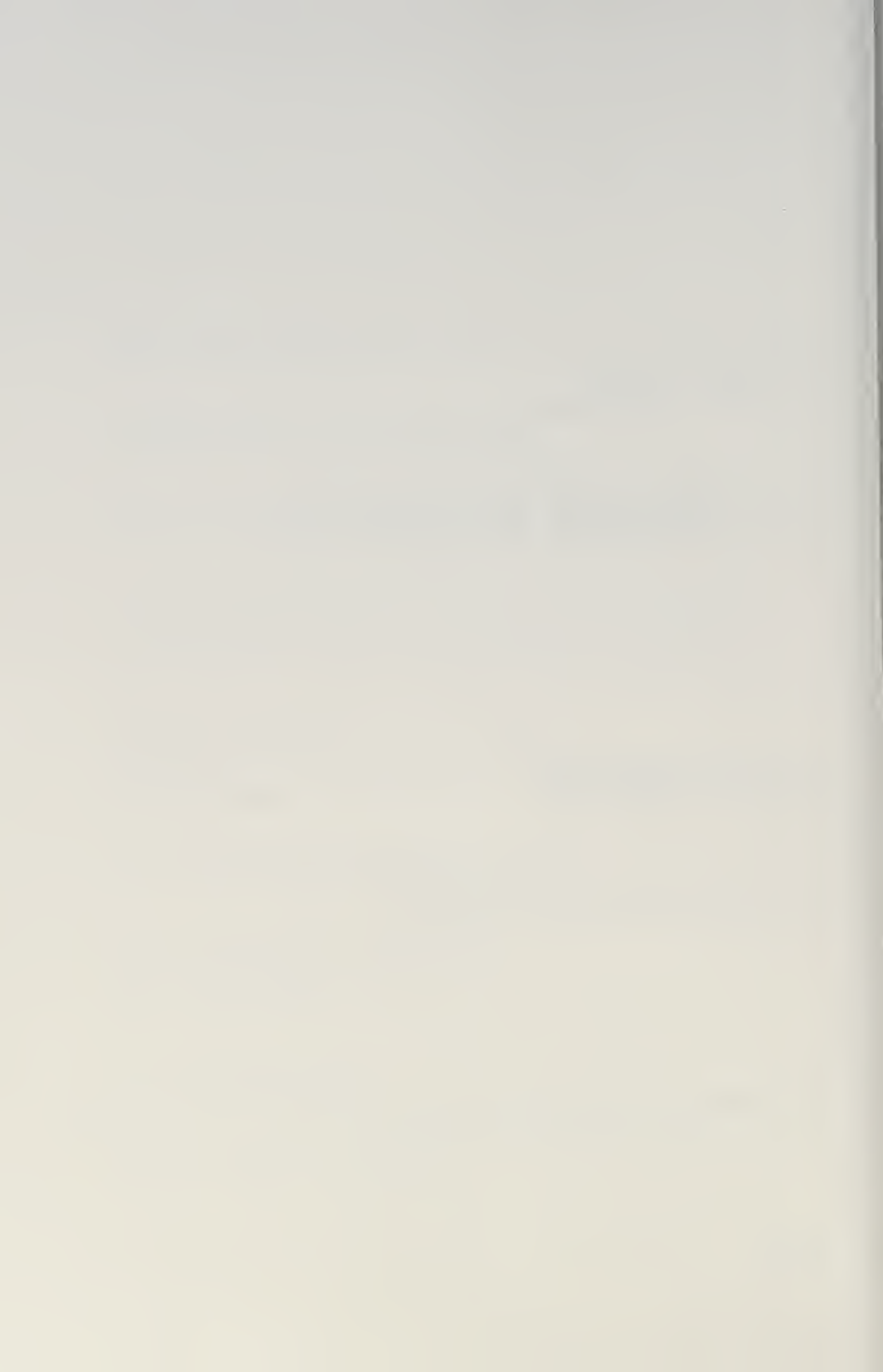
FATAL STRATEGIES

Jean Baudrillard

Introduction by Dominic Pettman

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Contents

Introduction: A Belated Invitation to the Orgy	7
Ecstasy and Inertia	25
Figures of the Transpolitical	45
Ironic Strategies	97
The Object and Its Destiny	141
For a Principle of Evil	219

A Belated Invitation to the Orgy

“Too bad. We’re in paradise.”

—Jean Baudrillard

WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the writings of Jean Baudrillard, it felt as if I had discovered the ideal life-coach for an age in which life made very little sense. His various works appeared as an almost seamless soliloquy, distributed over, and parceled into, a series of books that functioned more as chapters in an overarching compendium, than discrete texts of their own. To step midway into Baudrillard’s stream-of-consciousness, was to treat his compulsively calm commentary on the present as an illuminating guide for the perplexed. Indeed, few other thinkers could, to my mind, account for the mystifying “events” that were claiming the attention of the world at large at the time: Michael Jackson’s unfolding follies, baroque conspiracy theories, newsless news reports, wars staged for prime-time audiences, and pseudoscandals which seemed to stimulate debate in direct inverse ratio to the changes they inspired. To come of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s was to find oneself in a sociopolitical echo chamber, robbed even of the false promise of revolution, or compensatory hope of utopia. For

Baudrillard had insisted that *this* was indeed utopia: this lurching tableaux of strip malls, Sony Walkman-cocooned joggers, terrorist-themed fashion shows, designer painkillers, and poll results, announced with obscene confidence into hushed clinical waiting rooms. "The crisis of achieved utopia," is one of the many names Baudrillard christened the postmodern world, in which we were now obliged to endure the consequences of getting what we had collectively asked for. (The ultra-absorbent utility of Baudrillard's "we," however, is something that his critics have rightly questioned.) The orgy was over. Long live the orgy!

Revisiting *Fatal Strategies* fifteen years after the initial encounter, and twenty-five years after it was first published in France, I still have the sense that I am being introduced to an unclouded and fearless perspective, intent on breaking the rules of polite discourse by pointing out the strings, wires, smoke, and mirrors that many of us have been trained not to notice. Baudrillard's words resonate with those troubled, inchoate intuitions about the sinister mechanics of the system, bypassing the rational methods and assumptions of his peers. (After all, Baudrillard was a sociologist who had little patience with sociology.) The temptation is to simplify the insights contained in his own countersystem, and interpret the hyperreal condition as a political conspiracy or localizable menace, just as the Wachowski brothers did in their naive homage to the great man, *The Matrix*. (As Baudrillard eventually pointed out, *The Matrix* is the kind of film the Matrix itself would have made about the Matrix.) Rescuing Baudrillard's ideas from caricature thus becomes a challenging and important task, now that he is no longer with us.

One of Baudrillard's final appearances in the US was at the New School in New York, to deliver a paper entitled simply "Cannibal/

Carnival.” A line of people extended out onto 12th Street and down Sixth Avenue an hour before the lecture was scheduled to begin. Those walking by were under the impression a rock concert was imminent, as the auditorium, and then the overflow room, filled to capacity, forcing disappointed punters of all ages to be turned away. Clearly Baudrillard’s star had not dimmed, in spite of the ongoing disdain sanctioned by fickle academic fashions. For while part of this turnout could be explained by a morbid curiosity to see the last of the living postmodern giants, there was also a genuine desire to hear his pronouncements on the current “situation.”

But what does it mean to read Baudrillard not only after the orgy, but after Baudrillard himself—now that his words have sadly ceased midstream?¹ What kind of legacy has he left those who would enter the remarkably comprehensive and coherent universe of his ideas? Well, perhaps the most significant gift he has bequeathed his readers is precisely that: a durable map of hyperreality on the same 1:1 scale as Borges’s map of the empire. Where hyperreality exactly covers the territory of the real, Baudrillard’s *oeuvre* exactly covers the deterritorialized cartography of the hyperreal. In doing so, his books function as sophisticated tools for navigating an age which has leap-frogged alienation to arrive at pure simulation.

What’s more (and this might seem a strange claim at face value), Baudrillard has given us *hope*. Clearly no one could write with such a poisonous pen unless it was filled with the bile of his own disillusionments and disappointments. To call him a lapsed romantic is much too crude and misleading. However, there is an aestheticism at work in his ideas—a belief in the potential of

1. Before he himself committed the “delinquency” of dying, Baudrillard had argued that death had become the ultimate *faux pas* one can make nowadays.

changing course, “if only for the sake of change,” that appeals to those cliché-phobic people who have managed to cut their own beautiful souls like an umbilical cord. For instance, in reference to wholly pessimistic readings of his statement that we are living *post-festum*, Baudrillard reminds us that a woman is whispering into the man’s ear, “what are you doing after the orgy?” It is a potential rendezvous, an occasion to look forward to, and build toward: a slight shift in perspective, which creates a more promising view of the orgy itself. And so, by extending the poetic praxis of the Situationists into his own complex vision of the enemy (no longer life-draining Capital, but the biopolitical logic of the code), we find plenty of room to breathe inside those same concepts which impatient and obtuse readers simply dismiss as a litany of negative epiphanies.

Another great gift from Baudrillard is his style, which is nothing if not seductive. His ideas are complex, but fit together perfectly, like a particularly fiendish Chinese box. And like other great thinkers, he creates his own vocabulary—often counterintuitive—where “crisis” stands diametrically opposed to “catastrophe,” “ceremony” to “spectacle,” and “domination” to “hegemony.” When reading several titles in a row, his ideas can seem terribly repetitive. And yet, his phrasing is so exquisite, his examples so compelling, his rhetoric so uncompromising, that the diligent reader may feel obliged to take notes by simply transcribing page for page. (Indeed, were one to actually take the time to do so, then the strength of the skeleton supporting the dance comes into sharper relief.)

No work was more important to Baudrillard himself than *Fatal Strategies*, and it is indeed one of the best places to start for an overview of his thought. Here in these pages we find a holographic style; for the entire vision is contained in each fragment. From whichever unit one might choose to approach it—the sentence, the

paragraph, the chapter, or the entire book—a crystallized sense of the argument shines through. What is more, there is a fugue-like persistence at work between the pages: a Pachelbel's Canon of Genteel Disgust. Despite using academic language, and assuming some familiarity with the history of ideas, this book is not at all obscure or precious or esoteric. The author proceeds with the confidence of someone who has much to say, and wants others to understand it. To this end, he creates a formidably coherent textual universe; totalizing, despite—or due to—its reliance on paradox.

Along with *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, *Fatal Strategies* is one of Baudrillard's most emphatic and comprehensive statements.² Within these pages we are not only introduced to the key motifs developed in this earlier book, during his post-Marxist rehab—reversibility, value, impossible exchange, the object, transparency, virtuality, chance, etc.—but we are also witness to the underlying force (destiny/evil) which holds them together in the same constellation. Having previously noted that symbolic exchange is “a functioning principle that is sovereignly external and antagonistic to our economic ‘reality principle’” (SED, 120), Baudrillard goes on to develop the ecstatic challenge of the “counter-gift” to the restricted economy. Namely, that this anthropological specter cannot be assimilated without damage to the commodity system, based as it is

2. Of course there is no consensus on Baudrillard's key works, as illustrated by Mark Poster's description of *Symbolic Exchange and Death* as “bleak,” “pathetic” and “flawed” in his overall positive introduction to Baudrillard's *Selected Writings* (5). Mike Gane, in contrast, describes it as “without doubt Jean Baudrillard's most important book” (viii). This new edition of *Fatal Strategies* will no doubt inspire similar polarities of opinion, while claiming its retrospective, prominent place amongst his collected titles.

on utility, (re)production, exchange value, and profit. As a kind of “accursed share,” the symbolic embodies the fatal strategy of achieving liberation through “the deepening of negative conditions” (223). In other words, the sociocybernetic code can successfully absorb everything *except* a homeopathic dose of its own logic of exclusion. Thus, the violence of the symbolic—the obligation to reciprocate on levels deeper than objects tethered to exchange value—haunts the diminished contemporary world in the way kryptonite haunts Superman. The social law would have us believe that time is linear, and that gifts are unilateral. However, a more profound law invites the cyclical and the reversible to reenter the frame from which they had been rudely excluded.

Reversibility, for instance, denotes the limit point in which all alternative values spasm into their opposite: such as life and death, good and evil, chance and fate, male and female, human and inhuman, etc. As such, reversibility can also be considered a strategy emerging from *within* any given arrangement: the immanent potential for subversion or metamorphosis. At the general level of forms, and according the deeper laws of exchange mandated by the symbolic, such binary oppositions do not progress in a linear fashion, according to the dialectics of human history. Rather, they push each other to the outer limits, the object barrier, of their own moral values. No matter how we moderns strive to charge life with the positive, and death with the negative, there is “a kind of universal collusiveness of inseparable forms” (Pass 16–17) that makes a mockery of our digital desire to sort the quick from the dead. As such, the ideal Kantian subject is simply not qualified to parse a world plagued by third order simulation technologies. How can one argue rationally against “the malicious curvature that puts an end to the horizon of meaning” (45)? One can’t. How can one definitively

decode a code based on signifiers *sans* signifieds? One cannot. Thus every system is pregnant with the possibility that it will “overflow its own reality principle and ... be refracted in another logic” (211).

Reality itself, then, is a victim of what Baudrillard would later call “the perfect crime” (in which perfection itself—or at least the attempt to achieve perfection—is the criminal). The hyperreal is *not* an illusion. It is not a false world of Platonic cave shadows, from which one could escape. It is the *more real than real*. Reality, as experienced in the different classical times preceding postmodernism, was indexed against illusion, dreams, art, magic. Today, reality has been swallowed up and disappears in its own hyperbole, just as sex disappears in porn, and events in the news. The traditional division between culture and nature no longer holds in the hyperreal, since both have been so thoroughly mediated. Virtual reality is thus both an oxymoron and a tautology at the same time. For Baudrillard, this calls for a “pataphysical” perspective: a concept taken from the proto-Surrealist Alfred Jarry, whose writings promoted the “science of imaginary solutions”: a counterintuitive, ametaphysical, rendering of ruses, rules, predestinations, and interconnections. In a pataphysical climate, there is no foundation to distinguish between the cosmic and the political, the real or imagined, so that each infects the other in unprecedented ways.

Philosophizing with a Spanner

Fatal Strategies can therefore be read as a perverse manual of conduct, pointing out common temptations and traps to avoid. I shall leave the ever-green, ever-vexed question of the “lived” or practical application of theory aside, and rather note that Baudrillard’s playbook initially

disorients and then liberates, as it introduces the reader to a procession of ideas, blasphemous to both the secular priests of high reason and the neoromantic revolutionaries of the various “isms” of our time.

Inscribed within the title is a paradox and a pun. The paradox involves the nature of the conjunction, for as Baudrillard himself asks explicitly in the concluding pages, “how could there be fatality if there is strategy?” By what “sarcastic variable” could the strategic be figured as a subspecies of fate, or vice versa? Herein lies the enigma that powers not only this book, but Baudrillard’s entire wager of believing “for a single instant the hypothesis that there is a fatal and enigmatic bias in the order of things.” To do so is to throw into question all the fixed cultural algorithms the culture has relied upon to sort “right” from “wrong,” and distribute guilt or blame where necessary: “We have abolished the real world,” wrote Nietzsche, “what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? ... *But no! with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*”³ (Nietzsche cast a long and cooling shadow over Baudrillard’s work.)⁴ The pun embedded in the title, on the other hand, concerns the dual use of “fatal,” meaning primarily fate-as-destiny, but also the symbolically lethal forces described in his earlier works: Freud’s death-drive détourned toward objects and forms, rather than to biographical beings.

3. *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. RJ Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.51.

4. A less noted influence is Theodor Adorno, whose Mandarin melancholy could be read as a precedent to Baudrillard’s project: “Art is least to be saved by stuffing the extinct subject like a museum piece, and the object, the purely inhuman, which alone is worthy of art today, escapes its reach at once by excess and inhumanity” (*Minima Moralia: Reflections of a Damaged Life*, Verso, 2005, p.145).

Baudrillard dismisses current critical radicality as “useless.” Certainly it takes courage to claim one’s own system as the antidote to banality and denounce dialectics as obsolete. But it isn’t just a flippant statement on his part. The multipolar polemic of *Fatal Strategies* begins by noting that, “Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them.” In other words, the rhetorical and/or revolutionary strategy of opposition is now corrupt and paralyzed, so that it has become necessary—in an age of rampant indeterminism—to deepen negative conditions until they flip, according to the cultural-cosmic principles or reversibility detailed throughout. (A point pushed by Žižek a decade or so later.) Fatal strategies themselves differ from other such techniques, such as Machiavelli’s or Sun Tzu’s, in that they are not about securing the sovereignty or prosperity of the subject, but are deployed by forces enigmatic to us: evil genies, sly objects, ironic events, and spanners in the works which escape the centripetal will and best laid plan’s of the individual.

We are thus witness to “a dizzying overmultiplication of formal qualities.” All the elements of our world—science, politics, fashion, love—have become prey to a flabby hyperdeterminacy (which is equivalent to indeterminacy). This in turn leads to “the frenzy to explain everything, attribute everything, footnote everything.” Fatal strategies, in contrast, are those phenomena that slip away from the harsh light of interrogation, the presumption of explanation, and the tyranny of causality. Meanwhile, human activity continues to unfold in a kind of endless extratime, in which the results are meaningless, because no one can remember what they are playing for. “The worst thing,” writes Baudrillard, “is that there is no Promethean challenge involved here, no excess of passion or pride. It simply seems that the species has crossed some specific,

mysterious point, from which it is impossible to retreat, decelerate or slow down.” To put it somewhat differently, the audience collectively feels *de trop*, yet stubbornly refuses to leave after the credits have rolled.

Going back is certainly not an option. Neither is allowing things to continue in their default trajectory. One difficult question is the degree to which the eponymous fatal strategies belong to “us” humans (potentially at least), and to what extent we are merely caught in their logic. Take the example of terrorism, which had a different tenor during the time of composition (the most visible form being left-wing extremism such as the Red Brigade), but nevertheless continues to have the same structural relationship to the media, the masses, and the State. Baudrillard argues that to take a hostage is to wrench someone from their own fate, so that they are suspended—“neither dead nor alive.” From a “fatal” perspective, we are all hostages, stripped of our symbolic connection to death and destiny by the infantile demand for security. In a passage which echoes uncannily through the halls of the Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, Baudrillard asks: “what kind of State would be capable of dissuading and annihilating all terrorism in the bud? It would have to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level. If this is the price of security, is everybody deep down dreaming of this?”⁵

5. In 2003, Baudrillard revisited the question of terrorism, post-September 11, with a brilliant reading of the “retrospective” and “preventative” counterterror of the US and its epigones: “There is a ferocious irony here: an antiterrorist world system that ends up internalizing terror, inflicting terror on itself and emptying itself of all political substance—to the point of turning against its own population” (*In the Shadow of the Silent Majority*, 115). Yet this is where power also becomes “spectral and vulnerable.”

Terrorism is not something Baudrillard advocates on an individual, pragmatic level. He is certainly not asking his readers to hijack planes. And yet he understands the symbolic and semiotic conditions which summoned it into existence. When the drama of alienation gives way to the melodrama of terrorism, Baudrillard is bold enough to point out the silver lining. "It is worse than the one that replaces it, but at least it liberates us from liberal nostalgia and the ruses of history."

Fatal strategies are beyond human control, since they seem to be woven into the quantum fabric of the cosmos. That mysterious would-be holistic entity known as "the world," will—it seems—continue to use its own diabolical techniques to thwart human hubris and lack of imagination (which may or may not amount to the same thing). For instance, the object may only *pretend* to obey the laws of physics, "because it gives so much pleasure to the observer." Some scientists would probably throw the book across the room at such a suggestion. The silent majority, however, may read on intrigued.

On the level of the individual then, fatal strategies are secret social tendencies or cosmic "objective" ironies which can provide a model for how to approach certain situations. One can, for instance, refuse to treat seduction as a narcissistic game of capture and control (as Don Juan might), and rather consider it as a way to "soak pleasure from this charming and absurd difference that nature has put between the sexes." How successful one might be in replacing the obscene, demanding (and intrinsically alienating) discourse of love with the subtle, challenging (and inherently inclusive) challenge of seduction, is no means certain, given the cultural pressures set up against it. No doubt the stakes are against such an endeavor, given that the free-floating "ecological libido" of modern times represents "a product specific to our epoch, spread

out everywhere in homeopathic and homeostatic doses [which] can be drained, diverted, magnetized from one niche to another, according to the flow. It corresponds ideally to an order of manipulation.” And yet, Baudrillard suggests, merely registering a willingness to change the rules of erotic engagement, to tinker with the semiotic code, and alter the assumptions they represent, has the potential to transform human intimacy beyond the unthinking form of personal blackmail that it has largely become.

On the level of the masses, it matters little what any given individual seeks to achieve in terms of strategic behavior. Taken collectively, the masses are themselves a transpolitical condition, and thus a stronger medium than all the media. That is to say, they comprise a kind of headless body, whose radical passivity absorbs all attempts at manipulation from above through gestalt apathy, thus reversing the flow of power, which traditionally relies on at least a modicum of civic consciousness. Woven throughout such a scandalous view of the populace, however, is a challenge, should we decide to read it along a certain grain. The text notes:

Publicity, abstract, abject circulation of Eurodollars, stock prices, immorality of fashion cycles, useless technologies of prestige, electoral parades, arms escalation, all this is not only the historical sign of the domination of capital, but the most decisive proof of a fact more important than capital itself: no social project worthy of the name has ever really existed, that in the end no group has ever really conceived itself as social, that is to say in solidarity with its own values and coherent in its collective project, in short, there has never been even the shadow nor the embryo of a responsible collective subject, nor even the possibility of an objective of this kind. (101–102)

What may sound like a categorical dismissal of politics, anthropology, history—in fact, the entire set of Enlightenment trading cards—can be, from a different angle, considered a starting point for an unprecedented rethinking of what it means to exist as a social being without a society of any traditional description. Indeed, the important question of what it means to *belong*, in an age which has pushed far beyond alienation, has been taken up by contemporary Continental political philosophers, often via the trope of the “multitude.” Thinking through the possibility of a “community-of-those-who-have-nothing-in-common”—along with the conditions which block this possibility—is a supremely challenging task. Baudrillard’s ideas will have to be reread in the light of this seemingly endless “state of exception” (a phrase mentioned more than once in *Fatal Strategies*, and deployed most recently by Giorgio Agamben).

The Last Laugh

“This revolution will not be symbolic, dazzling, and subjective, but obscure and ironic. It won’t be dialectical, it will be fatal.”

—Jean Baudrillard

Half-way through *Fatal Strategies*, the author insists: “This is not ... a cynical philosophical view, but an objective view of societies, and possibly of all systems of thought. The energy itself is cynical and immoral.” In other words: “You must be cynical or perish.” The choice between cynicism or death is not one peddlers of emo music or “the new sincerity” care to contemplate these days.

However, the mistake is to think of this stance as inimical to what Bataille called “the practice of joy before death.” Indeed, Baudrillard’s entire project can be glimpsed in his firm belief that “there is perhaps another, more joyous way of seeing things, and of finally substituting for eternally critical theory an ironic theory” (120). The task is thus to be more cynical than cynical, in a global culture which is more real than real. Hence his habit of promoting ideas, “if only for the sake of change”: a noble attempt, in an age of simulated novelty and profound stagnation; where the Eternal Return has been replaced by the Eternal Rerun. But if radical pessimism has the latent ability to “save us,” is there not a subtext of salvation running through Baudrillard’s narrative? And how does this messianic trope square with his impatience toward the various cargo cults (evangelism, capitalism, etc.) attempting to thaw the cryogenically frozen body of history?⁶

Indeed, it seems at times that this author cannot shake off the *soixante-huitard* advocacy of action: “We need to coalesce all the centrifugal forces to escape from this force of inertia” (125). Then again, such words may represent merely a description of our dilemma, in the free indirect mode. Were Baudrillard still here to put us straight on this question, it would be surprising to hear an unambiguous answer, for that would be to smother the fatal force of its challenge. After all, the function of polite (i.e., neutralized) communication is transparency—something Baudrillard considered the most sterile form of evil yet concocted. “[S]ynthesis is a soft solution; dialectics a nostalgic one. The only radical and modern answer: potentiate what is new, original, unexpected ...”

6. It is surely significant that, in the watershed year of 1968, Baudrillard translated W. E. Mühlmann’s *Les Messianismes Revolutionnaires*.

Baudrillard's list of targets includes psychoanalysis, moralism, "America," second-wave feminism, pornography, cloning, false radicality... even yoga! In their stead, he seeks to locate a genuine revolution, on a scale or front that we—as the species-centric being *par excellence*—have not anticipated. Namely, the "insurrection of the object," which he describes as "a silent revolution, but the only one left now." The fate of the object is one strategy which, according to this book, has long languished unclaimed in the Lost & Found office of radical ideas; at least until now. And for this reason alone, it is a useful expansion of agency beyond the rather self-serving principles of the human subject. "Only the subject desires; only the object seduces" (141).⁷

Consistent to the end—and even in the last years of his life—Baudrillard shruggingly acknowledged the possibility of "a confrontation that is no longer precisely political but metaphysical and symbolic in the strong sense." As the West continues to both carnivalize and cannibalize itself under the self-appointed mandate of an endless and abstract "war on terror," the oppressed, exploited and colonized suffer from "a kind of enormous Stockholm syndrome," parroting the values of those who hold them hostage, both economically and ethically. And yet, just as he did a couple of decades earlier in *Fatal Strategies*, the great pataphysician sees an ongoing "justice in reversibility."⁸

7. In a later interview, Baudrillard admitted that a fatal strategy is "not really strategy. That's a play on words to dramatize the total passage from the subject to the object" (95).

8. "Cannibal/Carnival." Unpublished paper, delivered at New School (November 4, 2005).

The strategies Baudrillard documented so well, in an attempt to marshal them into some kind of beneficial pattern, for the sake of a new and vital currency, continue to pulse today without their master of ceremonies. Thankfully we can confidently assume that worldly ruses and cosmic twists are still in store. Baudrillard was many things to many people: a prophet of the present, a writer of science fiction, the most quotable thinker since Nietzsche, an alchemist who managed to leach every last drop of sentimentality out of nostalgia, the original Ronin of critical theory, and a man who talked incessantly about the power of silence. The crystalline, high-altitude pleasure of reading this particular book is the clarity of being liberated from banal hope, and ushered toward a more fatal kind of orientation toward the future. Recognizing and appreciating the difference between a fatal strategy, and common-or-garden *fatalism*, is the challenge that Baudrillard himself has left us.

— Dominic Pettman

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Ecstasy and Inertia

THINGS HAVE FOUND A WAY of avoiding a dialectics of meaning that was beginning to bore them: by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limit, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason.

But nothing prevents us from assuming that we could obtain the same effects in reverse—another unreason, also triumphant. Unreason is victorious in every sense, which is the very principle of Evil.

The world is not dialectical—it is sworn to extremes, not to equilibrium, sworn to radical antagonism, not to reconciliation or synthesis. This is also the principle of Evil, as expressed in the “evil genie” of the object, in the ecstatic form of the pure object and in its strategy, victorious over that of the subject.

We will find subtle forms of radicalizing secret qualities; we will fight obscenity with its own weapons. To the truer than true we will oppose the falser than false. We will not oppose the beautiful to the ugly, but will look for the uglier than ugly: the monstrous. We will not oppose the visible to the hidden, but will look for the more hidden than hidden: the secret.

We will not be looking for change, and will not oppose the fixed to the mobile; we will look for the more mobile than mobile:

metamorphosis... We will not distinguish the true from the false, but will look for the falser than false: illusion and appearance....

In this ascent to extremes, we should perhaps radically oppose obscenity and seduction; but, perhaps, their effects are cumulative.

We will be looking for something faster than communication: challenge, the duel. Communication is too slow; it is an effect of slowness, working through contact and speech. Looking is much faster; it is the medium of the media, the most rapid one. Everything must come into play instantaneously. We never communicate. In the to-and-fro of communication, the instantaneity of looking, light and seduction is already lost.

But against the acceleration of networks and circuits, we will also look for slowness—not the nostalgic slowness of the mind, but insoluble immobility, the slower than slow: inertia and silence, inertia insoluble by effort, silence insoluble by dialogue. There is a secret here too.

Just as the model is truer than true (being the quintessence of the significant features of a situation), and thus procures a vertiginous sensation of truth, fashion has the fabulous character of the more beautiful than beautiful: fascinating. The seduction it exerts is independent of all value judgement. It surpasses the aesthetic form in the ecstatic form of unconditional metamorphosis.

The ecstatic is an immoral form, while the aesthetic form always implies the moral distinction between the beautiful and the ugly. If there is a secret to fashion, beyond its own particular pleasures of art and taste, it is this immorality, this sovereignty of ephemeral models, this fragile and total passion that excludes all sentiment, this arbitrary metamorphosis, superficial and regulated, that excludes all desire (unless that is what desire is).

If that is desire, nothing prevents us from imagining that in the social, in politics and in all domains other than dress, desire also preferably turns to immoral forms, equally affected by this same potential denial of all value judgement and much more bound to that ecstatic destiny which tears things away from their “subjective” quality and leaves them to the sole attraction of the redoubled trait, of the redoubled definition that tears them away from their “objective” causes and surrenders them to the sole power of their unleashed effects.

Every trait thus raised to the superlative power, caught up in a spiral of redoubling—the truer than true, the more beautiful than beautiful, the realer than real—is assured of having an effect of vertigo independent of any content or quality of its own. This effect today tends to become our only passion. A passion for intensifying, for escalation, for an increase in power, for ecstasy—for any quality at all, provided that, ceasing to be relative to its opposite (the true to the false, the beautiful to the ugly, the real to the imaginary) it becomes superlative, positively sublime, as if it had absorbed all the energy of its opposite. Imagine a thing of beauty that has absorbed all the energy of the ugly: that’s fashion.... Imagine the true that has absorbed all the energy of the false: there you have simulation.

Seduction itself is vertiginous in that it is achieved not by an effect of simple attraction, but by the redoubled attraction of a sort of challenge, or a fatality of its essence—“I’m not beautiful; I’m worse,” said Marie Dorval.

We have passed alive into the models. We have passed alive into fashion and into simulation. Perhaps Roger Caillois was correct in his terminology, and our entire culture is in the process of slipping

from competitive and expressive games to games of chance and vertigo. The very uncertainty about the purpose of it all pushes us toward a dizzying over-multiplication of formal qualities, and therefore to the form of ecstasy. Ecstasy is the quality proper to any body that spins until all sense is lost, and then shines forth in its pure and empty form. Fashion is the ecstasy of the beautiful: pure and empty form of an aesthetic spinning about itself. Simulation is the ecstasy of the real: just look at television, where real events follow each other in a perfectly ecstatic relation, that is, in dizzying, stereotyped, unreal and recurrent ways that allow their senseless and uninterrupted concatenation. In ecstasy: this is the object in advertising, as is the consumer in contemplation of the advertisement—the spinning of use-value and exchange-value into annihilation in the pure and empty form of the brand-name.

But we must go further: antipedagogy is the ecstatic—that is, pure and empty—form of pedagogy. Antitheater is the ecstatic form of theater: no more stages or scenes, no more content, but theater in the street, actor-less, theater of all for all, which even becomes confused with the regular unfolding of our lives without illusion. Where is the power of illusion if it delights in retracing our daily life and transfiguring our workplace?

Yet this is precisely how and where today's art seeks to go beyond itself, to deny itself, and the more it seeks to fulfill itself in this way, the more hyperreal it becomes and the more it transcends itself towards its empty essence. There is vertigo here too, vertigo, *mise en abyme*, and stupefaction. Nothing did more to stupefy the creative act, to make it shine resplendent in its pure and inane form, than suddenly to exhibit, as Duchamp did, a bottle rack in an art gallery. The ecstasy of a common object at the same time

pushes the pictorial act to its ecstatic form—without an object, it will spin about itself and in some sense disappear, but not without exerting on us a definitive fascination. Today art no longer creates anything but the magic of its disappearance.

Imagine a good resplendent with all the power of Evil: this is God, a perverse god creating the world on a dare and calling on it to destroy itself

What might also make us wonder is this going beyond the social, the irruption of the more social than social—the mass; this is a social that has absorbed all the inverse energies of the antisocial, of inertia, resistance and silence. Here the logic of the social reaches its limit—the point where it inverts its finalities and reaches its point of inertia and extermination, but at the same time approaches ecstasy. Masses are the ecstasy of the social, the ecstatic form of the social, the mirror where it is reflected in all its immanence.

The real does not efface itself in favor of the imaginary; it effaces itself in favor of the more real than real: the hyperreal. The truer than true: this is simulation.

Presence does not efface itself before emptiness, but before a redoubling of presence which effaces the opposition between presence and absence.

Nor does the empty efface itself before the full, but before repletion and saturation—the fuller than full. This is the reaction of the body in obesity, of sex in obscenity: an abreaction to the void.

Movement does not disappear as much into immobility as into speed and acceleration—into the more mobile than movement, so to speak, which pushes it to the limit while stripping it of sense.

Sexuality does not fade into sublimation, repression and morality, but fades much more surely into the more sexual than sex: porn, the hypersexuality contemporaneous with the hyperreal.

More generally things visible do not come to an end in obscurity and silence—instead they fade into the more visible than visible: obscenity.

An example of this ex-centricity of things, of this drift into excrescence, is the irruption, into our system, of chance, indeterminacy and relativity. The reaction to this new state of things has not been a resigned abandonment of old values but rather a mad overdetermination, an exacerbation of these values of reference, function, finality and causality. Maybe nature does abhor a vacuum, for it is there that, in order to dispel the void, plethoric, hypertrophic, saturated systems arise—something redundant always establishes itself where there is nothing left.

Determinacy does not disappear in favor of indeterminacy, but of hyperdeterminacy—the redundancy of determinacy in the void.

Finality does not give way to the aleatory, but to a hyperfinality, a hyperfunctionality: more functional than the functional, more final than the final—hypertely.

Plunged by chance into an abnormal uncertainty, we have responded with an excess of causality and finality. Hypertely is no accident in the evolution of a few animal species, but a challenge of finality to a growing indeterminacy. In a system where things are increasingly governed by chance, finality turns into delirium, and elements develop that know only too well how to exceed their end—until they wind up invading the whole system.

This goes for the behavior of the cancerous cell (hypervitality in only one direction), the hyperspecialization of objects and subjects, the operability of the slightest detail and the hyper-

signification of the slightest sign: the leitmotif of our daily lives, this is also the secret canker of all obese and cancerous systems—communication, information, production, destruction—all of which have long passed the limits of their function, of their use-value, and entered upon a ghostly escalation of finalities.

A hysteria the inverse of that of finalities: the hysteria of causality, corresponding to the simultaneous erasure of origins and causes: the obsessive search for origin, responsibility, and reference—an attempt to exhaust phenomena back to their infinitesimal causes. But it is also the complex of genesis and genetics that inspires, to varying degrees, psychoanalytic palingenesis (all of the psyche hypostasized in early childhood, all signs become symptoms), biogenetics (all probabilities saturated by the fatal agency of molecules), the hypertrophy of historical research, the frenzy to explain everything, attribute everything, footnote everything. All this becomes a fantastic encumbrance—the references all living off each other and at each other's expense. An excrescent system of interpretation develops with no relation to its objects. All this comes from a headlong flight forward from the hemorrhage of objective causality.

The phenomena of inertia accelerate, frozen forms proliferate, and growth is immobilized in excrescence. This is the form of hypertely, which goes further than its own end: the crustacean that leaves the sea far behind (to what secret ends?) and will never have the time to come back. The growing gigantism of the statues of Easter Island.

Tentacular, protuberant, excrescent, hypertelic: this is the fate of inertia in a saturated world. To deny its own end through hyperfinality—is this not also the process of cancer? The revenge of

growth in excrescence. Revenge and denunciation of speed in inertia. Masses are also swept up in this gigantic process of inertia by acceleration. Mass is this excrescent process that hurls all growth to its doom. It is a circuit shortcircuited by a monstrous finality.

Exxon: the American government asks the multinational for a general report on all its activities throughout the world. The result is twelve volumes of a thousand pages each, which would take years of work to read, let alone analyze. Where is the information?

Must we put information on a diet? Must we remove the fat from the obese, the obese systems, and create disinformation clinics?

There is an incredible overpotentiality of strategic weapons, equaled only by the demographic excrescence of the world. As paradoxical as it seems, both are of the same kind and correspond to the same logic of excrescence and inertia. This is a triumphant anomaly: no principle of law or measure can temper either one or the other—they reciprocally imply each other. And the worst thing is that there is no Promethean challenge involved here, no excess of passion or pride. It simply seems that the species has crossed some specific, mysterious point, from which it is impossible to retreat, decelerate, or slow down.

“A painful thought: past a certain point in time, history has not been real. Without realizing it, the whole human race seems to have suddenly left reality behind. Everything that is supposed to have happened since then would no longer be true, but we wouldn’t be able realize it. Our task and our duty would now be to uncover this point, and until we did we would have to persist in our present destruction.”

— Canetti

Dead point*: the dead center where every system crosses this subtle limit of reversibility, contradiction and doubt and enters live into noncontradiction, into its own exalted contemplation, into ecstasy....

Here begins a pataphysics of systems. This logical going beyond, this escalation, incidentally offers some advantages as well, even if it always assumes the form of a catastrophe in slow motion, as is the case for destructive and strategic weapons systems. At the point of the overcoming of destructive forces, the war scene is over. There is no longer any useful correlation between the potential for annihilation and its objective, so it becomes senseless to employ it. The system dissuades itself, and this is the paradoxically beneficial aspect of dissuasion: there is no more space for war. We should therefore hope for the continuation of this nuclear escalation and arms race as the price we pay for pure war; that is, for the pure and empty form—the hyperreal and eternally deterring form—of war, where for the first time we can congratulate ourselves on the absence of the event. War, just like the real, will never again take place, unless of course the nuclear powers succeed in their deescalation and manage to circumscribe new spaces for war. If military power, at the price of a deescalation of this madness so marvellously useful at one remove, once again finds a theater for war, a restricted space—in a word, a human one—for war, then weapons will once again find their use-value—and their exchange-value: it will again be possible to exchange war. In its orbital and ecstatic form war has become impossible to exchange, and this orbitality protects us.

* Translators' note: Words or phrases in Baudrillard's text which originally appear in English (or languages other than French) will be designated with an asterisk.

What about Canetti's wish to seize this blind point beyond which "things have stopped being true," where history has stopped existing without our realizing it—without which realization we can only persevere in our current destruction?

Even supposing we could determine this point, what would we do? By what miracle would history become true again? By what miracle could we go back in time to head off its disappearance? For this point is also that of the end of linear time, and all the marvels of science-fiction for "going back in time" are useless if from now on time no longer exists, if behind us the past has already totally disappeared.

What precautions should we have taken to avoid this historical collapse, this coma, this volatilization of the real? Did we commit some error? Did the human race commit some error, violate some secret, commit some fatal imprudence? It is as useless wondering about that as asking yourself the mysterious reason why a woman has left you: nothing could have been changed in any event. The terrifying aspect of an event of this kind is that, beyond a certain point, all efforts to exorcize it only precipitate it; no foreboding has ever been of any use; each event makes the one which preceded it completely right. It is the naïveté of imputing every event to causes that makes us think it could not have happened—the pure event, without any causes, can only unfold ineluctably. On the other hand it can never be reproduced, whereas a causal process can always be, which is exactly why it is no longer an event.

Canetti's wish, therefore, is a pious one, even if his hypothesis is a radical one. The point he refers to is by definition impossible to find, for if we could grasp it, time would be given back to us. The point from which we could turn the process of the dispersion of time and history around escapes us—that is really why we

have crossed it without noticing it, and of course without having wanted to.

Furthermore, perhaps Canetti's point does not even exist. It exists only if you can prove that there was in fact a history before it—which becomes impossible once you have passed the point. In a sphere foreign to history, history itself can no longer reflect or prove itself. This is why we call on every previous epoch, every way of life, every mentality to historicize itself, to recount itself with proof and documents in hand (everything becomes documentary): it is because we feel that all this has been invalidated in our own sphere, which is that of the end of history.

We can neither go backward nor accept this situation. Some have cheerfully resolved the dilemma: they have discovered the anti-Canetti point, that of a deceleration which would allow us to come back into history, the real, and the social, like a satellite lost in hyperspace reentering Earth's atmosphere. A false radicality had scattered us into centrifugal spaces; a vital leap will bring us back to reality. Everything becomes real and takes on meaning again once this specter of historical unreality, this sudden collapse of time and the real, is conjured away.

Perhaps they're right. Perhaps we should have stopped this hemorrhage of value. Enough of this terrorist radicalism; enough simulacra—let us have a rebirth of morality, belief and meaning. Down with twilight analyses!

Beyond this point there are only inconsequential events (and inconsequential theories), precisely because they absorb their sense into themselves. They reflect nothing, presage nothing.

Beyond this point there are only catastrophes. Perfect is the event or language which assumes its own mode of disappearance, knows how to stage it, and thus reaches the maximal energy of appearances.

The catastrophe is the maximal brute event, here too more eventful than the event—but an event without consequences, one that leaves the world in suspense.

Once the meaning of history is over, once this point of inertia has been passed, every event becomes catastrophe, becomes an event pure and without consequence (but that is its power).

The event without consequence—like Musil's man without qualities, the body without organs, or time without memory.

When light is captured and swallowed by its own source, there is then a brutal involution of time into the event itself. Catastrophe in the literal sense: the inflection or curve that has its origin and end coincide in one, that makes the end return to the origin and annul it, yielding to an event without precedent and without consequences—pure event.

This is also the catastrophe of sense: the event without consequence is signaled by the fact that all causes can be imputed to it indifferently without its being possible to choose among them. Its origin is unintelligible, its destination equally so. You cannot go back against the course of time nor the course of meaning.

Every event is today virtually inconsequential, open to all possible interpretations, none of which could determine its meaning: the equiprobability of all causes and of all consequences—multiple and aleatory imputation.

If the waves of meaning, if the waves of memory and historical time are receding, if the waves of causality around the effect are

behind this acceleration something is beginning to slow down absolutely. Are we now slowing down absolutely?

What if light slowed, dropping to “human” speeds? What if it bathed us in a slow-motion flux of images, until it was slower than our own movement?

We would then need to generalize from the case of light reaching us from stars that have long ceased to exist—their image is still crossing light-years to get to us. If light was infinitely slower, a lot of things, even the closest ones, would have already suffered the fate of those stars: we would see them, and they’d be here, but they would no longer be there. Wouldn’t this be the case for the real itself: something whose image is still coming at us, but which no longer exists? We can make the analogy with mental objects and the mental ether.

Or supposing light were very slow, could bodies approach us faster than their image—then what would happen? They would rub into us without our seeing them coming. We could further imagine, unlike our universe, where slow bodies all move at speeds much lower than that of light, a universe where bodies move at prodigious speeds, except light itself, which would be very slow. Total chaos, no longer regulated by the instantaneity of luminous messages.

Light like the wind, with variable speeds, even dead calms, where no image could get to us from the zones affected.

Light like perfume: differing according to the body, scarcely diffusing outside of an immediate environment. A sphere of luminous messages attenuating as they go. The images of the body scarcely propagate beyond a certain luminous territory: beyond that, it no longer exists.

Or also, light moving with the slowness of continents, continental plates, one slipping over the other, and thus provoking shocks that would distort all our images and visions of space.

Can one imagine a slow refraction of faces and gestures, like the movements of swimmers in heavy water? How do you look someone in the eyes, how do you seduce him if you are not sure he is still there? What if a cinematic slow-motion took control of the whole universe? A comical exaltation of the accelerated, which transcends sense by explosion but also the poetic enchantment of slow-motion, which destroys sense by implosion.

Suspense and slow-motion are our current tragic forms, since acceleration has become our banal condition. Time is no longer evident in its normal passing, since it has been distended, enlarged to the floating dimension of reality. It is no longer illuminated by will. Nor is space illuminated any longer by movement. Since their destination has been lost, some kind of predestination would have to intervene again to give them back a tragic effect. We can read this predestination in suspense and slow-motion, that which so suspends the development of the form that the meaning no longer crystallizes. Or else beneath the discourse of meaning another flows slowly and implodes under it.

So slow that it could curl up on itself and even stop totally in its progression, light could lead to a total suspension of the universe.

This kind of play of systems around a point of inertia is illustrated by the catastrophic form congenital to the era of simulation: the seismic form, where the ground is missing, that of fault and failure, dehiscence and fractal objects, where immense plates, entire layers slide one under the other and produce intense surface tremors. No longer is it the devouring fires of heaven that smite us: that generating thunderbolt that was still a punishment and a purification and which fructified the earth. It is not the deluge: that is rather a maternal catastrophe, which is at the origin of the world. These are the great

legendary and mythical forms that haunt us. More recently we have the explosion, which culminated in the obsession with nuclear catastrophe (but, inversely, it fed the myth of the Big Bang, of the explosion as origin of the universe). Even more current is the seismic form, so true is it that catastrophes take on the form of their culture. Cities are even distinguished by the catastrophic forms they presuppose and which are a vital part of their essential charm. New York is King Kong, or the blackout, or vertical bombardment: "Towering Inferno."* Los Angeles is the horizontal fault, California breaking off and sliding into the Pacific: Earthquake.* This is a form that today is more proximal and evocative: on the order of fission and instantaneous propagation, undulatory, spasmodic and brutal commutation. The sky no longer falls on you from on high; instead whole territories slide away. We are in a fissile universe, of wandering ice-floes and horizontal drifts. Interstitial collapse—that is the seismic effect (mental, too), that waits in ambush for us. The dehiscence of the things most firmly attached, the trembling of things tightening and contracting over their emptiness. For at bottom (!) the ground never existed, only a cracked epidermis; nor were there any depths, which we now know are in fusion. Seisms tell us as much; they are a requiem for the infrastructure. We are no longer waiting for the stars or the heavens, but for the subterranean gods who threaten us with a collapse into emptiness.

We dream of capturing that energy, too. But that is pure madness. We might as well hope to capture the energy of automobile accidents, of dogs that have been run over, or of anything that collapses. (New hypothesis: if things have a greater tendency to disappear and collapse, perhaps the principal source of future energy will be accident and catastrophe). One thing is certain: even if we don't succeed in capturing seismic energy, the symbolic wave of the earthquake is not about to subside: the symbolic energy, so to

speech, the fascinating and derisory power that such an event affords, is incomparable to the material destruction.

It is that power, that symbolic energy of rupture, that they are really trying to capture in that mad project, or in that other, more immediate one, of heading off seisms through scenarios of evacuation. The funny part is that experts have calculated that the state of emergency decreed by an earthquake warning would unleash such a panic that its effects would be greater than the earthquake itself. Here we fall into full derision: lacking a real catastrophe, it will be easy to unleash a simulated one, one which will be as good as the first and can even replace it. You wonder if that is not what “experts” fantasize about—and it is exactly the same case in the nuclear domain: don’t all the preventive and dissuasive systems act like virtual foci of catastrophe? On the pretense of prevention, they materialize all the consequences in the immediate future. How true it is that we cannot rely on chance to bring on catastrophe: we have to find its programmed equivalent in the preventive measures.

It is thus evident that a State or a power sophisticated enough to predict earthquakes and prevent the consequences would constitute a danger to the community and the species much more fantastic than the earthquakes themselves. The *terremotati** of Southern Italy have violently attacked the Italian State for its negligence (the media arrived before the emergency rescue teams, an obvious sign of the current hierarchy of priorities). They correctly blamed the catastrophe on the political order (inasmuch as it claims universal solicitude for the population); but never would they dream of an order capable of such a dissuasion of catastrophe: the price would be such that people would at bottom prefer catastrophe—with all its misery it at least fulfils the prophetic demand for a violent end. It at least answers a profound need for derision

of the political order. The same is true of terrorism: what kind of State would be capable of dissuading and annihilating all terrorism in the bud (Germany)? It would have to arm itself with such terrorism and generalize terror on every level. If this is the price of security, is everybody deep down dreaming of this?

Pompei. Everything is metaphysical in this city, including its dreamy geometry, which is not a spatial but mental geometry, labyrinthine—time seems more harrowingly frozen here than even in the noonday heat.

The tactile presence of these ruins is magnificent for the psyche, with their suspense, their twisting shadows, their sheer matter-of-factness. A conjunction of the banality of a promenade and the immanence of another time, another moment, unique, that of catastrophe. It is surely the murderous but abolished presence of Vesuvius which lends the dead streets the charm of hallucination—the illusion of being here and now, at the moment before the eruption, and the same reinstated two thousand years later, by a miracle of nostalgia, in the immanence of a former life.

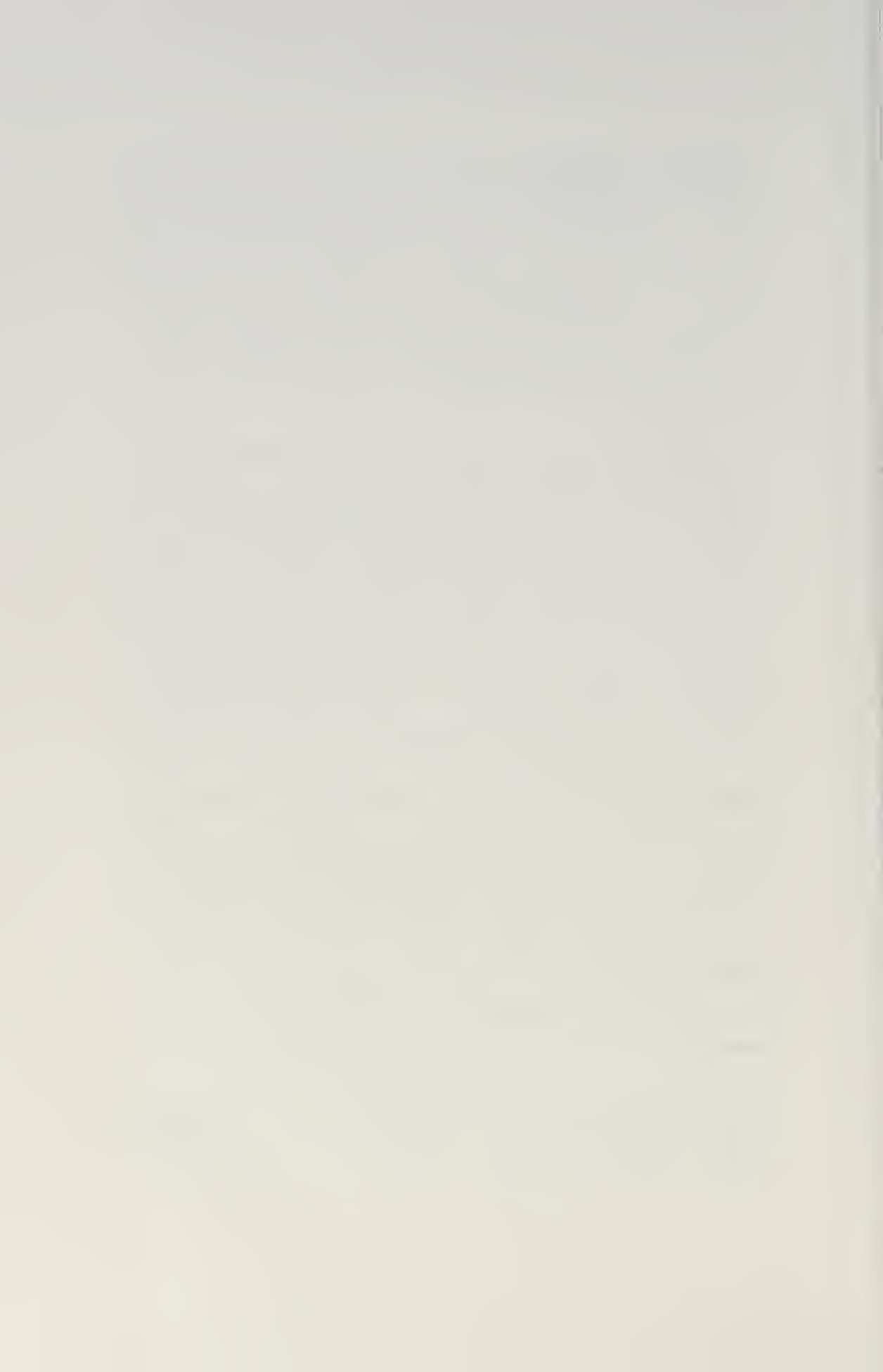
Few places leave such an impression of worrisome uncanniness (it is no surprise that Jansen and Freud set the psychic action of *Gradiva* there). Here one feels all the heat of death, rendered all the more vivid by the fossilized and fugitive signs of daily life: wheel-ruts in the stone, worn curbs, the petrified wood of a half-open door, the fold of a toga on a body buried beneath the ashes. No history stands between these things and us, like the kind that gives monuments their prestige: they materialize for us here, right now, in the very heat where death caught them.

Neither monumentality nor beauty are essential to Pompei, only the fatal intimacy of things, the fascination of their instantaneity as well as that of the perfect simulacrum of our own death.

Pompei is thus a kind of *trompe-l'oeil* or primal scene: the same vertigo of a missing dimension, that of time, the same hallucination of an added dimension, that of the transparency of the slightest details, like that precise vision of submerged trees living at the bottom of an artificial lake over which you pass while swimming.

This is the mental effect of catastrophe: stopping things before they end, thus maintaining them indefinitely in the suspense of their apparition.

Pompei once again destroyed by earthquake. What kind of catastrophe is this descending on these ruins? What kind of ruin is it that needs to be once again dismantled and buried? The sadistic irony of catastrophe, secretly waiting for things, even ruins, to regain their beauty and meaning in order to destroy them all over again. Catastrophe jealously makes sure to destroy the illusion of eternity, but it plays with it too, fixing things into a second eternity. This fixed-medusified blasting of a swarming presence of life in a catastrophic instantaneity is what makes for the charm of Pompei. The first catastrophe—Vesuvius—was a success. The recent seism is much more problematic. It seems to follow the rule of the duplication of events, to parodic effect. A petty rehearsal or repetition of the great premiere. The end of a great destiny with a push from a miserable divinity. But there is perhaps another meaning here, come to warn us that we are no longer in the age of grandiose collapses and resurrections, of games of death and eternity, but of little fractal events, smooth annihilations and gradual slides, with no tomorrow from here on, since it is the traces themselves that are erased by this new destiny. This leads us into the horizontal era of events without consequences, the last act being directed by nature herself in a glare of parody.



Figures of the Transpolitical

THE TRANSPOLITICAL IS THE TRANSPARENCY and obscenity of all structures in a destructured universe, the transparency and obscenity of change in a dehistoricized universe, the transparency and obscenity of information in a universe emptied of event, the transparency and obscenity of space in the promiscuity of networks, transparency and obscenity of the social in the masses, of the political in terror, of the body in obesity and genetic cloning.... The end of the scene of the historical, the end of the scene of the political, the end of the scene of fantasy, the end of the scene of the body—the irruption of the obscene. The end of the secret—the irruption of transparency.

The transpolitical is the mode of disappearance of all of that (it is no longer the mode of production but the mode of disappearance that excites us); it is the malicious curvature that puts an end to the horizon of meaning. The saturation of systems brings them to their point of inertia: the equilibrium of terror and deterrence, the orbital round of floating capital, H-bombs, information satellites—and of theories, themselves floating, satellites of an abstract referential. Obesity of memory systems, of information stocks that are henceforth no longer treatable—obesity, the saturation of a system of nuclear destruction now exceeding its own ends, excrescent, hypertelic.

The transpolitical is also this: the passage from growth to excrement, from finality to hypertely, from organic equilibria to cancerous metastases. This is the site of a catastrophe and no longer of a crisis. Things rush into it at the rhythm of a technology, including soft and psychedelic technologies, which drag us ever further away from any reality, any history, any destiny.

But if the secret is being increasingly harried by transparency, if the scene (not only that of meaning, but also the power of illusion and the seduction of appearances) is being increasingly harried by the obscene, we may take consolation in the fact that the enigma remains whole—including that of the transpolitical.

The era of the political was one of *anomie*: crisis, violence, madness, and revolution. The era of the transpolitical is that of anomaly: an aberration of no consequence, contemporaneous with the event of no consequence.

Anomie is that which escapes the jurisdiction of the *law*; anomaly is that which escapes the jurisdiction of the *norm*. (Law is an institution, but the norm is a curve; law is a transcendence, but the norm is a mean.) Anomaly is at play in an aleatory, statistical field, a field of variations and modulations which no longer knows the margin or transgression characteristic of the law, since all of that is reduced to a statistical and operational equation, a field so normalized that abnormality no longer has a place in it, even as a kind of madness or subversion. Yet there still remains anomaly.

There is something mysterious about this; we don't know exactly where it comes from. As for *anomie*, we at least knew what it is about: law is allegedly known, and *anomie* not an aberration, but an infraction of a specific system. For anomaly, there is doubt about the very law it escapes, the rule it breaks. This law no longer exists or is not known. There is infraction, or rather waywardness,

with respect to a state of things we no longer know to be a system of cause and effect.

Anomaly no longer has the tragic side of abnormality, nor even the dangerous and deviant side of *anomie*. It is somehow harmless, harmless and inexplicable. It is on the order of a pure and simple apparition, the rising to the surface of a system (ours) something come from elsewhere. From another system?

Anomaly has no critical incidence in the system. Its figure is rather that of a mutant.

The Obese

I would like to talk about an anomaly—that fascinating obesity, such as you find all over the U.S., that kind of monstrous conformity to empty space, of deformity by excess of conformity that translates the hyperdimension of a sociality at once saturated and empty, where the scene of the social as well as that of the body are left behind.

This strange obesity is no longer that of a protective layer of fat nor the neurotic one of depression. It is neither the compensatory obesity of the underdeveloped nor the alimentary one of the overnourished. Paradoxically, it is a mode of disappearance for the body. The secret rule that delimits the sphere of the body has disappeared. The secret form of the mirror, by which the body watches over itself and its image, is abolished, yielding to the unrestrained redundancy of a living organism. No more limits, no more transcendence: it is as if the body was no longer opposed to an external world, but sought to digest space in its own appearance.

These obese people are fascinating for their total oblivion of seduction. Furthermore, they no longer worry about it; they have

no complexes about how they live, insouciant, as if there was not even an ego ideal left for them. They are not ridiculous and they know it. They claim a sort of truth, and in fact they do display something of the system, of its empty inflation. They are its nihilist expression, that of the general incoherence of signs, morphologies, forms of alimentation and of the city—hypertrophied cellular tissue, proliferating in all directions.

A fetal obesity, primal and placental: as if they were pregnant with their own bodies but could not be delivered of them. The body grows and grows without being able to deliver itself. But also a secondary obesity, the obesity of simulation in the image of present systems, bloated with information they can never deliver, the obesity characteristic of operational modernity, in its frenzy to store and memorize everything, to pass, in the most total uselessness, to the very limits of the inventory of the world and of information, and in the process to set up a monstrous potentiality for which there is no representation possible, which can no longer even be put into play, a vain redundancy that, a century after larry, but in a cool universe without irony, and without pataphysical acid, evokes Père Ubu's famous paunch.

Pataphysics or metaphysics, this pregnancy hysteria is one of the strangest signs of American culture, of this spectral environment where each cell (each function, each structure), is left with the possibility, as in cancer, of ramifying, of multiplying indefinitely, of occupying virtually all the space by itself, of monopolizing all the information unto itself (feedback is already an obese structure, the matrix of all structural obesities), of settling down into a contented genetic redundancy. Each molecule happy in the paradise of its own formula....

It is therefore not the obesity of a few individuals that is at stake, but that of a whole system, the obscenity of a whole culture. It is when the body loses its rule and its stage or scene that it reaches this obscene form of obesity. It is when the social body loses its law, its scene and its stakes that it also reaches the pure and obscene form we know it to be, its visible and too visible form, its ostentation, the investment and overinvestment of all spaces by the social—the spectral and transparent character of the whole remaining unchanged.

This obesity too is spectral—in no way heavy, it floats in the good conscience of sociality. It incarnates the formless form, the amorphous morphology of the currently social: the ideal individual paradigm of reconciliation, of the closed and self-managed niche. These are no longer bodies, strictly speaking, but specimens of a certain cancerous inorganicity that now lie in wait for us everywhere.

To remain in the oral dimension (although there is nothing compulsive or orally repressive about this obesity), you could say that the social is just like the sense of taste in American cuisine. It is a gigantic enterprise of dissuasion from the taste of food: its savor is, as it were, isolated, expurgated and resynthesized in the form of burlesque and artificial sources. This is flavor*, just as once there was cinematic glamor*: erasing all personal character in favor of an aura of the studio and the fascination of models. Likewise for the social: just as the function of taste is isolated in the sauce, the social is isolated as a function in all the therapeutic sauces in which we float. A sociosphere of contact, control, persuasion and dissuasion, of exhibition of inhibitions in massive or homeopathic doses (“Have a problem? We solve it!”*): this is obscenity. All structures turned inside out and exhibited, all operations rendered visible. In America this goes all the way from the bewildering network of aerial telephone and electric wires (the

whole system is on the surface) to the concrete multiplication of all the bodily functions in the home, the litany of ingredients on the tiniest can of food, the exhibition of income or I.Q., and includes harassment by signals, the obsession with displaying the innards of power, the equivalent of the mad desire to locate the critical function in the lobes of the brain....

Living determination is lost in desperate programming, and everything reinvents itself as overdetermination and looks for its hysterical hypostasis. Likewise, the social, once the mirror of conflict, class, and the proletariat, finds its definitive hypostasis among the handicapped. Historical contradictions have taken the pathological form of mental or physical deficiency. There is something strange about this conversion hysteria of the social—the most probable diagnosis is that, for the handicapped as well as for the feeble-minded or the obese, the social is haunted by its disappearance. Having lost its credibility and the rules of its political game, the social looks in what it sees as its own its living waste for a son of transpolitical legitimacy—after the management of the crisis, overt self-management of the deficit and monstrosity.¹

It used to be, “To each according to his deserts,” then, “to each according to his needs,” and later, “to each according to his desire.” Today it is: “to each according to his lack.”

1. But “deficit” management of the social results, as we know, in all sorts of impasses, of which the following is an allegory: all over the US, they have adapted the sidewalks to afford access to motorized handicapped persons. But the blind who used to be guided by the curbs are disoriented, and are often run over. So they came up with the idea of a handrail for the blind along the street, but then the handicapped get caught on these rails in their wheelchairs

The obese somehow escape sexuality and sexual division by the indivisibility of the full body. They resolve the void of sex by absorption of the surrounding space. They are pregnant, symbolically speaking, with all the objects from which they have been unable to separate, or those from which they have not found enough distance to love. They do not separate the body from the non-body. Their bodies are convex or concave mirrors; they have not succeeded in producing the flat mirror that could reflect them.

This break—the mirror stage, which allows the child, by distinguishing limits, to open himself to the scene of imagination and representation—doesn't occur with the obese, and lacking access to this internal division, they enter into the undivided multiplication of bodies without images.

There are no obese animals, just as there is no obscene animal. Could it be that the animal is never confronted with the scene, nor with its own image? Not being subjected to this scenic obligation, it could not be obscene. For man, on the other hand, this obligation is absolute, but for the obese there is a kind of release from this obligation, from all pride of representation, from any seductive impulse—the loss of the body as face. The pathology of the obese is not endocrine, but a pathology of the scene and the obscene.

It is difficult to say what constitutes the scene of the body. We can at least say this: it is where the body is in play, and particularly where it plays itself, where it escapes into the ellipsis of forms and movements, into dance, where it escapes its inertia, into gesture, where it is unbound itself, into the aura of looking, where it makes itself into allusion and absence—in short, where it offers itself as seduction. It is the absence of all this which transforms the obese into an obscene mass.

Suddenly the obese, in its redundancy, makes sex appear like too much, superfluous. It has this in common with the clone—another mutant which has never yet appeared, but which the obscene prefigures rather well. Does not the obese person cherish the dream of hypertrophying in order one day to divide into two like beings? Transsexual in his own way, does he not aim at going beyond sexual reproduction, at going back once again to scissiparous single-celled being? The proliferation of the body is not far from genetic proliferation.

The paradox of cloning is precisely that of producing beings identical to their genetic parent (non-Oedipal!), and therefore sexual, even though sexuality has become perfectly useless in the matter. The sex of the clone is superfluous. This is not Georges Bataille's excessive superfluity—it is simply a useless residue, like certain animal organs or appendages, whose finality we can no longer conceive and which seem anomalous and monstrous. Sex has become an excrescence, an eccentric difference that no longer produces meaning as such (such dead differences are scattered in heaps throughout our history and that of the species).

Perhaps there exists in all organic unity a drive to develop by pure contiguity, a tendency to linear and cellular monotony? This is what Freud called the death drive, which is only the undifferentiated excrescence of the living. This process knows neither crisis nor catastrophe: it is hypertelic, in the sense that it has no other end than limitless increase, without any consideration of limits.

At a given moment something happens to stop this process. In obesity the process doesn't stop. The body, losing its specific traits, pursues the monotonous expansion of its tissues. Not longer even individualized or sexual, it is no more than an indefinite extension: metastasis.

Franz von Baader calls metastasis, which he likens to ecstasy—in his essay, “Über den Begriff der Ekstasis als Metastasis” (“On the Concept of Ecstasy as Metastasis”)—the anticipation of death, and of the beyond of its own end at the heart of life itself. And certainly there is some of this for the obese, whom we may think of as having swallowed their own dead bodies while still alive—which makes for too much body and suddenly makes the body seem like too much. This is the engorgement of a useless organ. He has somehow swallowed his own sex, and it is this swallowing of the sex that makes for the obscenity of this hypertrophied body.

Baader’s ecstatic or metastatic form, that of the death which comes to haunt the living and makes them appear like useless incarnations, can be readily generalized to present-day information systems. These too are metastatic in their anticipation of dead meaning in living signification, thereby producing too much meaning, a production of superfluous meaning, like a useless prosthesis. The same is true of porn; its ghostly ambiance comes to it from its anticipation of dead sex in living sexuality, from the weight of all the dead sex (as one used to speak of the weight of dead labor on living labor). In so doing, porn makes sexuality appear superfluous—that is what is obscene: not that there is too much sex, but that sex is too much. What makes the obese obscene is not that there is too much body, but that the body is superfluous, *de trop*.

What is the secret end in all of this (for there must be one)? What lewd demon would hold this deforming mirror up to the body (for there is lewdness in it)?

Perhaps it is a matter of revolt, as in cancer? Once, revolts were political; there were groups or individuals oppressed in their desire, their energy or their intelligence. Today these hardly ever break out. In our quartenary universe, revolt has become genetic, like the cells in

cancer and metastases: uncontrollable vitality and undisciplined proliferation. This is a revolt too, a nondialectical, subliminal one which escapes us. But who knows the destiny of cancerous formations? Perhaps their hypertely corresponds to the hyperreality of our social formations. It is as if the body, its cells, were rebelling against their genetic decree, against the commandments (as they've rightly been termed) of DNA. The body rebels against its own "objective" definition. Is it a pathological act (as occurs elsewhere in the deregulation of antibodies)? In traditional pathology, somatic or psychosomatic, the body reacts to external aggressions—physical, social, psychological: exoteric reaction. With cancer it's a matter of an esoteric reaction: the body rebels against its own internal organization, undoes its own structural equilibrium. It's as if the species had had enough of its own definition and had thrown itself into an organic delirium.²

2. We can observe that the pathology related to the metaphorical body, with its division and repression, no longer operates in this metastatic phase. The body, that of the obese, the clone, the cancer, is a prosthesis, a metastasis, an ex-crescence—it is no longer a scene, and fantasy and repression no longer hold for it. In some sense it no longer has an unconscious, and this is the end of psychoanalysis. But this is doubtless also the beginning of another pathology: we know this clonic (chronic) melancholy of infinitely divisible beings, of single-celled, nonsexual protozoans that proceed by extension and expulsion and no longer by drive and intensity, that proceed not by growth but by excrescence, not by seduction but by transduction (that of bodies that have become networks and which thread their way through a network). We know this melancholy of being and of narcissistic society—narcissistic by indivisibility and indefiniteness—for which analysis can no longer do anything. In any event, this kind of analysis, psychoanalysis, can only say something in the field of metaphor, which is that of a symbolic order. It has nothing to say in a different order—neither in that of metamorphosis nor, at the other extreme, in that of metastasis.

The obese is also in a total delirium. For he is not only large, of a size opposed to normal morphology: he is larger than large. He no longer makes sense in some distinctive opposition, but in his excess, his redundancy, his hypeneality.

He exceeds his own pathology. This is why he escapes both dietetics and psychotherapy, and goes back to that other logic, that exponential strategy where things deprived of their finality or of their reference redouble each other in a kind of hall of mirrors.

Obesity would thus be a good example of the turn of events lying in wait for all of us, this revolution in things which lies no longer in their dialectical transcendence (*Aufhebung*) but rather in their potentialization (*Steigerung*), in their elevation to the second power, to the n^{th} power—in that ascension to extremes related to the absence of rules for the game.

Like speed—which is the sole perfect expression of mobility, because it is unlike movement (which has meaning or direction)—obesity no longer has any meaning or direction either; it goes nowhere and no longer has anything to do with movement: it is the ecstasy of movement. Thus there is something about the body, of which, in its aberration, obesity may be the perfect confirmation and ecstatic truth, because in it the body, instead of being reflected, captures itself in its own magnifying mirror. “Only tautological sentences are perfectly true,” says Canetti.

The Hostage

Violence is anomic, but terror is anomalous. Like obesity, terror is a sort of convex and deforming mirror of order and the political scene: the mirror of its disappearance. It too seems to come from

some other set of connections, aleatory and vertiginous, from a panic by contiguity, and no longer seems to respond to the determinations of mere violence. More violent than the violent—such is terrorism, whose transpolitical spiral corresponds to the same ascension to the limits in the absence of any rules for the game.

Neither dead nor alive, the hostage is suspended by an incalculable outcome. It is not his destiny that awaits for him, nor his own death, but anonymous chance, which can only seem to him something absolutely arbitrary. There are no longer even any rules for the game of his life or death. This is why he is beyond alienation, beyond the terms of alienation and exchange. He is in a state of radical emergency, of virtual extermination.

He may no longer even run the risk of his own life: it too is stolen from him to serve as a cover. That is somehow the worst part of it—the hostage himself no longer risks anything: he is perfectly covered, and is removed from his own fate.

He is no longer a victim at all, since he is not the one who dies—he merely answers for the death of another. His sovereignty is not even alienated; it is congealed.

This is how it is in war, according to a law of equivalence that is precisely not one of war: ten hostages shot for every assassinated officer. But whole peoples can serve as hostages to their leaders: the German people were destined for death by Hitler if he was not victorious. And in nuclear strategy, civilian populations and great urban centers are used as hostages by military high commands: their death and destruction serve as a dissuasive argument.

We are all hostages. We all now serve as dissuasive arguments. Objective hostages: we answer collectively for something, but for what? This is a kind of fate that is fixed, and whose manipulators we can no longer even see. But we know the scales on which our death

is decided are no longer in our own hands, and we now live in a state of permanent suspense and emergency whose symbol is the nuclear bomb. Objective hostages of a savage god, we don't even know what event, what accident will touch off the ultimate manipulation.

But we are also subjective hostages. We answer for ourselves; we serve as a cover for ourselves, we answer for our risks with our own heads. This is the law of the insured society, where all risks must be covered. This situation corresponds to that of the hostage. We are hospitalized by society, taken hostage.* Neither life nor death: this is security—this, paradoxically, is also the status of the hostage.

This is an extreme and caricatured form of responsibility: an anonymous, statistical, formal and aleatory one that plays on the terrorist act or the taking of hostages. But if you think about it, terrorism is only the executioner for a system which itself also seeks both total anonymity and, at the same time and contradictorily, total responsibility for each of us. With the death of anyone, it executes the sentence of anonymity that is henceforth ours, that of the anonymous system, anonymous power, the anonymous terror of our real lives. The principle behind extermination is not death, but rather statistical indifference.

Terrorism is only the operator of a concept that denies itself in its very realization, that of unlimited, indeterminate responsibility (anyone is responsible for anything at any given moment). It only carries to its extreme consequences the essential proposition of liberal and Christian humanism: all men are in solidarity; you, here, are in solidarity with and responsible for the wretched poverty of the pariah of Calcutta. While asking ourselves about the monstrosity of terrorism, we should perhaps ask ourselves if it does not really derive from a proposition of universal responsibility itself monstrous and terrorist in its essence.

Our paradoxical situation is this: because nothing any longer has meaning, everything should work perfectly. Because there is no longer a responsible subject, each event, even a minimal one, must be desperately imputed to someone or something—everyone is responsible, some maximal floating responsibility is there, waiting to be invested in any kind of incident. Every anomaly must be justified and every irregularity must find its guilty party, its criminal link. This too is terror and terrorism: this hunt for responsibility without any common measure with the event—this hysteria of responsibility that is itself a consequence of the disappearance of causes and the almighty power of effects.

The problem of security, as we know, haunts our societies and long ago replaced the problem of liberty. This is not as much a moral or philosophical change as an evolution in the objective state of systems:

- a relatively loose, diffuse and extensive state of the system produces liberty;
- a different state of the system (denser) produces security (self-regulation, control, feedback, etc.);
- a further state of the system, that of proliferation and saturation, produces panic and terror.

There is no metaphysics in any of this: these are objective states of the system. You can apply it just as well to the circulation of traffic or to the system of circulation of responsibility—it amounts to the same thing. Liberty, security, terror: we have successively passed through these stages in every domain. First personal responsibility, then control (the assumption of responsibility by an

objective entity), then terror (generalized responsibility and blackmail for responsibility).

It is for the purpose of making amends and putting a stop to the scandal of accidental death (unacceptable for our system of liberty, law and profitability) that the great systems of terror have been set up, that is, programs for the prevention of accidental death by systematic and organized death. That is our monstrously logical situation: the death systems put an end to death as a accident. And it is that logic that terrorism tries desperately to disrupt by replacing systematic death (institutionalized terror) with elective logic: that of the hostage.

The Pope, by offering himself as a substitute victim for the hostages in Mogadishu, seeks to replace anonymous terror with an elective death, a sacrifice, similar to the Christ-like model of universal redemption. But this offer is a parody without intending to be, for it puts forth a solution and model that are altogether inconceivable in our present systems, whose province is not sacrifice but extermination, not the elected victim but spectacular anonymity. Even the "sacrifice" of terrorists, trying to resolve the situation by their own death, has nothing expiatory about it; it raises for only an instant the veil of anonymous terror.

There is nothing to redeem. Both terrorists and hostages have lost their names: they all have become unnamable.

They no longer have any territory, either. We speak of "terrorist space": airports, embassies, fractile zones, nonterritorial zones. The embassy is the infinitesimal space in which a whole country can be taken hostage. The plane, with its passengers, is a parcel of land, a wandering molecule of enemy territory, and therefore almost no longer a territory, therefore almost a hostage already, since to take

something hostage is to tear it from its territory and revert it to the equilibrium of terror. Today this terror is our normal, silent condition everywhere, but it materializes more visibly in orbital space, the sidereal space that everywhere now hovers over our own.

It is from this no man's land of terror that the world is now managed; it is from this in some sense extraterritorial, extraplanetary space that the world is literally taken hostage. That is what the equilibrium of terror means: the world is held collectively responsible for the order that reigns there—if anything were to come dangerously close to infringing this order, the world would have to be destroyed. And from where could it be done more efficiently than from those places outside the world, from satellites and bombs in orbit? From there, definitively no longer a territory, all territories are ideally neutralized and held hostage. We have become the satellites of our satellites.

The space of terrorism is no different than the orbital space of control. By satellites and flights into space, civilian as well as military, planetary space is *mise en abyme*, suspended in an uncertain imminence, just like the hostage in the space of his detention: 'ex-stasized,' literally, then exterminated.³

Just as there is a space of terrorism, there is a circulation of hostages. Every hostage-taking, every terrorist act is an answer to another act, and one gets the impression, on a global level, of a chain, a linking of transpolitical terrorist acts (while the political scene doesn't give this impression of a chain reaction at all) like an

3. The abstraction of orbital control should not hide the fact that this equilibrium of terror is present on the infinitesimal and individual level: we are held responsible for the order that rules in us. If this order came to be seriously threatened, we are psychologically programmed to destroy ourselves....

uninterrupted circuit, also orbital, conveying a sort of sacrificial information from one point to another on the planet a little like the *kula* circulated throughout the Melanesian archipelago.

Nothing is more like this putting hostages into circulation, this absolute form of human convertibility, a sort of pure and impossible form of exchange, than the form of Euro-petro dollars and other floating currencies, deterritorialized to such an extent, and beyond gold and national currencies, that they are virtually no longer exchanged, but follow their orbital cycle among themselves, incarnating an abstract delirium of transcendence and control. And it is also the pure and impossible form of war that is incarnated in orbital bombs.

We are all hostages, and we are all terrorists. This circuit has replaced that other one of masters and slaves, the dominating and the dominated, the exploiters and the exploited. Gone is the constellation of the slave and the proletarian: from now on it is the hostage and the terrorist. Gone is the constellation of alienation: from now on it is that of terror. It is worse than the one it replaces, but at least it liberates us from liberal nostalgia and the ruses of history. It is the era of the transpolitical that is beginning.

We have entered the constellation of blackmail not only in the “political” sphere, but everywhere. Everywhere the insane multiplication of responsibility operates as dissuasion.

Even including our own identity, whose hostages we are: called upon to assume it, to answer for it with our own lives (this is called security, occasionally social), called on to be ourselves, to talk, delight, realize ourselves—under pain of... Under pain of what? A provocation. Provocation—unlike seduction, which allows things to come into play and appear in secret, dual and ambiguous—does not leave you free to be; it calls on you to reveal yourself as you are. It is

always blackmail by identity (and thus a symbolic murder, since you are never that, except precisely by being condemned to it).

The entire sphere of manipulation is of the same order. Manipulation is a soft technology of violence by blackmail. And blackmail always functions by taking hostage a parcel of the other, a secret, an affect, a desire, a pleasure, his suffering, his death; this is what we play on in manipulation (and this covers the whole field of psychology). It is our way of arousing, by forced solicitation, a demand equivalent to our own.

In the interindividual regime of demand (as opposed to love, passion, or seduction), we are submitted to affective blackmail, and we are the affective hostage of the other: "If you don't give me that, you will be responsible for my depression—if you don't love me, you will be responsible for my death," and of course, "if you don't allow yourself to be loved, you will be responsible for your own death." In short, a hysterical envelopment—a summons and solicitation to respond.

In order not to be taken, take others hostage. Don't hesitate. It's the common rule anyway, and it's the general condition. The only transpolitical condition is that of masses. The only transpolitical act is terrorism, the one which reveals our transpolitical wretchedness and draws its own extreme conclusions. And this, unfortunately for our critical spirits, is true on either side. In the taking of a hostage there is no message; it has no meaning or political efficacy. It is an event without consequences (and always leads to a dead end). But do political events themselves ever offer anything but a false continuity? It is the solution of continuity that is interesting. Once it seemed to present itself as revolution; today it ends up as special effects. And terrorism itself is only a gigantic special effect.

However, this is not because no meaning is intended. Against the general transparency, terrorism wishes to call on things to regain their meaning again, but does no more than accelerate this sentence of death and indifference. Its effect is nevertheless of a type special enough to be distinguished and opposed to others as the catastrophic form of transparency, the crystalline form, the intensive form—unlike all the extensive forms that surround us. It reflects the dilemma we are unfortunately locked into—that there is doubtless no solution to the latent extension of terror save in its visible intensification.

The only revolution in things is today no longer in their dialectical transcendence (*Aufhebung*), but in their potentialization, in their elevation to the second power, in their elevation to the n^{th} power, whether that of terrorism, irony, or simulation. It is no longer dialectics, but ecstasy that is in process.

Thus terrorism is the ecstatic form of violence; thus the state is the ecstatic form of society; thus porn is the ecstatic form of sex, the obscene the ecstatic form of the scene, etc. It seems that things, having lost their critical and dialectical determination, can only redouble themselves in their exacerbated and transparent form, as in Virilio's "pure war": the ecstasy of unreal war, contingent and present everywhere. Spatial exploration likewise is a *mise en abyme* of this world. Everywhere the virus of potentialization and *mise en abyme* carries the day, carries us towards an ecstasy which is also that of indifference.

Terrorism—hostage-taking—would be a political act if it were solely an act of the desperate oppressed. (Perhaps it still is in certain cases.) But it has in fact become normal and generalized behavior on the part of all nations and all groups. So the Soviet Union doesn't liquidate Sakharov, nor does it annex Afghanistan: it takes Sakharov

hostage; it takes Afghanistan hostage: "if you upset the balance of power, then I will stiffen into cold war...." The Olympic Games serve as America's hostage against the Soviet Union: "if you don't back off, the Games are off...." Oil serves as a hostage for the producing countries against the West. There is no point in deploring this situation in the name of human rights or anything else. We are already far beyond that, and hostage-takers do nothing but openly translate the truth of the system of dissuasion (which we counter with the system of morality).

More commonly, we are all in this way hostages of the social: "if you don't participate—if you don't manage your capital, money, health, desire—if you're not social, you destroy yourself." This baroque idea of taking oneself hostage in order to have one's demands met is not so singular—this is the act committed by "mad-men" who hole up and resist to the death.

Blackmail is worse than interdiction. Dissuasion is worse than sanctions. In dissuasion it is no longer, "Don't do that," but rather, "if you don't do it..." And it stops there—the threatening eventuality is left in suspense. The whole art of blackmail and manipulation lies in this suspense—the "suspense" peculiar to terror (just as in hostage-taking the hostage is suspended, not condemned: suspended over an outcome that escapes him). Needless to say, we all live collectively under nuclear blackmail—not under the direct threat, but under the blackmail of the nuclear, which is strictly speaking not a system of destruction, but of planetary manipulation.

This institutes a wholly different type of relation to power than that based on the violence of interdiction. The latter had a specific referent and object, and therefore transgression of it was a possibility. Blackmail, however, is allusive, and is no longer

based either on an imperative or on the utterance of a law (we should invent the dissuasive mode, based on the nonutterance of the law and on floating retorsion) but plays on the enigmatic form of terror.

Terror is obscene, in that it puts an end to the scene of interdiction and violence, which at least was familiar to us.

Blackmail is obscene, in that it puts an end to the scene of exchange.

The hostage is himself obscene. He is obscene because he no longer represents anything (this is the very definition of obscenity). He is in a state of pure and simple exhibition. A pure object, without an image, deceased before being dead. Frozen in a state of decease. Cryogenized in his own way.

This was the triumph of the Red Brigades in the kidnapping of Aldo Moro: to demonstrate, by putting him out of action (with the complicity of the Christian Democrats, who rushed to drop him), that he represented nothing, and suddenly to make him the null equivalent of the State. Power, thus reduced to its anonymous remains, no longer even has any importance as a cadaver, and can end up in the trunk of a car, in a way shameful to all, and thus also obscene, since it no longer even has any meaning. (In the traditional political order one never would have taken a prince or a king hostage—one might kill him, but even then his corpse is powerful.)

The obscenity of the hostage is verified by the impossibility of getting rid of him (the Red Brigades experienced that with Moro, too). It is the obscenity of someone who is already dead—this is why he is politically unusable. Obscene by his disappearance, he becomes the mirror of the visible obscenity of power. (In this, the Red Brigades had completely succeeded; his death, on the other

hand, was much more problematic, for while it is true that dying in itself serves no purpose—you have to know how to disappear—it is also true that it serves no purpose to kill: you have to know how to make someone disappear).

Imagine Judge D'Urso, found bound and gagged in a car—not dead, but with headphones on his head and symphonic music blasting through them: transistorized. Sacred shit that the Red Brigades managed each time to throw at the feet of the Communist Party.

This obscenity, this exhibitionist stand of terrorism, contrary to the opposite stand of secrecy in sacrifice and ritual, explains its affinity with the media, themselves the obscene stage of information. It is said that without the media there would be no terrorism. And it is true that terrorism does not exist in itself as an original political act: it is the hostage of the media, just as they are hostage to it. There is no end to this chain of blackmail—everyone is the hostage of the other: this is the end of our so-called “social” relation. Besides, there is another factor behind all of this, which is something like the womb of this circular blackmail: the masses, without which there would be neither media nor terrorism.

The masses are the absolute prototype of the hostage, of the thing taken hostage, that is, annulled in its sovereignty, abolished and nonexistent as subject—but take note—radically inexchangeable as object. As with the hostage, there is nothing one can do with him, and one doesn't know how to get rid of him. This is the unforgettable revenge of the hostage, and the unforgettable revenge of the masses. This is the fatality of manipulation: that it can never be, or take the place of, strategy.

Only by nostalgia, in fact, can we even distinguish an active manipulator from someone who is passively manipulated—thus

reverberating the old relationships of domination and violence into this new era of soft technologies. Take just one of the figures of manipulation, the minimal unit question/answer in interviews, polls and other forms of directive solicitation. Certainly, the answer is induced by the question. But the one who asks the question has no more autonomy: he can only ask questions which have a chance of getting a circular reply—he is caught in exactly the same vicious circle. There can be no strategy on his part; there is manipulation on both sides. The game is even, or rather the stakes are equally nil.

The Moro case already offered a beautiful example of this zero-sum strategy, whose black-box was the media, with the inert and fascinated masses acting as amplifier. A gigantic cycle with four protagonists, where an unfindable responsibility circulates—the revolving stage of the transpolitical.

In the translucent person of Moro it is the empty, absent State (the power that traverses us without reaching us, that we traverse without reaching it) that is held hostage by terrorists, themselves clandestine and untakable—both sides desperately aping power and counterpower. Impossible to negotiate—Moro's death means that there is nothing left to negotiate between two partners who are, in fact, each other's hostage, as in any system of unlimited responsibility. (Traditional society is a society of limited responsibility* and it is for this reason that it can function. In a society of unlimited responsibility—that is, where the terms of exchange no longer exchange anything, but are continually exchanged among themselves—the whole just revolves about itself, producing nothing more than effects of vertigo and fascination. One must admit that

* Translator's note: Société à responsabilité limitée (S.A.R.L.) is the French equivalent of the English business term "incorporated" (Inc.)

Italy, which has already given history its most beautiful spectacles, Venice, the Church, *trompe-l'oeil*, and opera, presents us today, in the spectacle of terrorism, with its most fertile and baroque episode, and this with the general complicity of the whole of Italian society: *terrorismo dell'arte*.)

In the kidnapping of Judge D'Urso things take another turn. It is no longer so much the official State against the free and clandestine terrorists; it is the imprisoned terrorists, promoted to the rank of judges from the depths of their prisons (while Judge D'Urso is symbolically taken into detention) against the confidentiality of official investigations (the media pretends they do not exist). The poles have switched: the terrorist prisoners, in some sense liberated from clandestinity, no longer negotiate with the political class, but with the "media" class.

In reality, it also appears that:

- There is nothing to negotiate: the texts whose distribution the Red Brigades demanded are politically ridiculous and, furthermore, an open secret.
- The State has no more idea of what to do with the prisoners—more trouble in prison than underground—than the Red Brigades with their hostage.

There remains the effect of revolving responsibility that the Red Brigades manage to create, and where the State, the political class and the media themselves are found responsible for the likely death of D'Urso, as much as the terrorists. To circulate maximal responsibility gratuitously is equivalent to setting off general irresponsibility, thereby demolishing the social contract. The rules of

the political game are abolished not by the strict exercise of violence, but by the maddened circulation of acts and implications, effects and causes, and by the forced circulation of values of State such as violence, responsibility, justice, etc.

Such pressure is fatal for the political scene. It is accompanied by an implicit ultimatum which goes approximately as follows: "What price will you pay to be rid of terrorism?" Understood: terrorism is still a lesser evil than a police state capable of ending it. It is possible that we secretly acquiesce in this fantastic proposition. There's no need of "political consciousness" for this; it's a secret balance of terror that makes us guess that a spasmodic eruption of violence is preferable to its rational exercise within the framework of the State, or to total prevention at the price of a total programmatic domination.

It is in any case preferable that something offsets the State in its omnipotence. If the mediations which assured this relative equilibrium have disappeared, along with the rules of the political game, if the social contract has disappeared at the same time as the possibility of our inventing ourselves socially, that is to say, of spontaneously sacrificing a portion of our liberty with a view to the collective well-being, for the simple reason that everything is already virtually taken care of by the State (here, too, there is an end of exchange: the individual can no longer even negotiate his parcel of liberty, lacking which he looks upon himself as a hostage, an insured zombie), it is then inevitable that the State—in keeping with the disappearance of the political scene—arouse a form, at the same time radical and phantasmatic, of contestation: the phantom of terrorism, which plays the same game as it does, and with whom the State draws up a sort of perverse new social contract.

In any case this ultimatum leaves the State with no response left, for it calls on it to make itself more terrorist than the terrorists. And it throws the media into an insoluble dilemma: if you want no more terrorism, then you must renounce information itself.

This question of the hostage is fascinating because it poses the problem of the inexchangeable. Exchange is our law, and exchange has its rules. We are now in a society where exchange is becoming more and more improbable, where fewer and fewer things can really be negotiated because the rules for them have been lost, or because exchange, by becoming more generalized, has brought about the emergence of the last objects irreducible to exchange—and these have become the real stakes.

We are living the end of exchange. However, only exchange protects us from destiny. Where exchange is no longer possible, we find ourselves in a fatal situation, a situation of destiny.

The inexchangeable is the pure object, whose power forbids either possessing or exchanging it. It is something very precious that we don't quite know how to get rid of. It burns, and isn't negotiable. It can be killed, but it takes revenge. The corpse always plays this role. Beauty, too, and the fetish as well. It has no value, but is priceless. It is an object of no interest, and at the same time absolutely singular, without equivalent, and almost sacred.

The hostage has both qualities at the same time: an annulled, abolished, anonymous object, and at the same time absolutely different, exceptional, of high intensity, dangerous, sublime (as dangerous as the terrorist: ask those whose job it is to free the hostages if the latter do not inspire, by their very existence, by their very presence, the same terror as the terrorist. Furthermore, to liquidate the situation, the elimination of the hostages is objectively equivalent to that of the terrorists; governments will

choose sometimes one solution, sometimes the other, according to the juncture).

For all these reasons the hostage is secretly no longer negotiable, precisely because of his absolute convertibility. No situation embodies this paradox to such an extent: torn from the circuit of exchange, the hostage becomes exchangeable against anything at all. Become sacred by subtraction, by the state of radical exception in which he is put, the hostage becomes the fantastic equivalent of everything else.

The hostage is not far from the fetish or talisman—an object also cut off from the context of the world to become the center of a singular operation, that of the omnipotence of thought. Games, in particular, games of chance, are about nothing else: money, taken out of circulation and destined to be lost, becomes the stakes of a prodigious convertibility, a mental manipulation by thought only possible when money has taken the form of pure object, perfectly artificial: fictitious, a fetish.

But we know that the fetish cannot be reabsorbed into the ordinary world (which excludes the omnipotence thought), nor can gaming money be put back into the economic circuit—this is the secret law of the other circuit. Likewise, there are the greatest difficulties in converting the hostage into financial or political currency. That is the illusion of the terrorist—the terrorist illusion in general: the exchange never happens, and is impossible. Just as in torture, where the suffering of the tortured is inconvertible into political profits, or even into pleasure for the torturers, the terrorist can never change the hostage back; he has somehow ripped him too violently from reality to be able to give it back to him.

Taking a hostage is at once the desperate attempt to radicalize the balance of power and to recreate an exchange at the summit, to

render an object or an individual inestimably valuable by seizure and disappearance (therefore by absolute scarcity), and at the same time the paradoxical failure of this attempt, for, since the violation amounts to an annulment of the subject, this exchange-value collapses in the very hands of the terrorists. On the other hand, in the kind of situation created in this way, the system quickly manages to notice that it can function without this individual (Moro, for example) and that in some sense it is even better not to get him back, for a hostage who gets off is more dangerous than a dead one: he is contaminated; his only power is one of malefic contamination. (It would have been good strategy, on the part of the Red Brigades, after having annulled Moro as a statesman, to throw back this zombie whom no one wanted anymore, the marked card that would have upset the whole political game. It would then have been up to others to get rid of him.)

If convertibility is impossible, it turns out that, in the final analysis, the terrorist never exchanges anything but his own life against the life of the hostage. And this explains the strange complicity that ends up bringing them together. Violently withdrawing the hostage from the circuit of value, the terrorist also withdraws him from the circuit of negotiation. The two are out of circulation, accomplices in their state of exception, and what is established between them, beyond an impossible convertibility, is a dual figure, a figure of reduction perhaps—the only modern figure of shared death, while still being the extreme figure of indifferent death—so indifferent as to be inexchangeable.

Or else one should realize that hostage-taking never has negotiation as its goal: it produces the inexchangeable. The “How do we get rid of terrorism?” is a false problem. The situation is original in that it is inextricable. One must conceive of terrorism as a utopian

act, proclaiming inexchangeability from the beginning, and violently so, experimentally staging an impossible exchange, and thereby verifying at its limit a banal situation, our own, that of the historical loss of the scene of exchange, the rule(s) of exchange, and the social contract. For where is the other now? With whom do we negotiate what is left of our liberty and sovereignty, with whom do we play the game of subjectivity and alienation, with whom do we negotiate over my image in the mirror?

What has disappeared is that good old alterity of relation, that good old investment of the subject in the contract and rational exchange, the site of both profitability and hope. It all yields to a state of exception, a mad speculation which is more like a duel or a provocation. Hostage-taking is a speculation of this order—ephemeral, senseless, instantaneous. It is not essentially political, but insists on identifying itself from the very first as the dream of a fantastic deal, the dream of an impossible exchange, and also as a denunciation of the impossibility of this exchange.

The Obscene

All these figures that appear to be those of an exacerbated indifference, of an exacerbation of emptiness, of obesity, of terror, are also figures of the loss of illusion, play and scene, and therefore figures of the obscene.

Loss of the scene of the body for the obese, loss of the scene of exchange for the hostage, loss of the sexual scene in obscenity, etc. But also an evanescence of the scene of the social, political and theatrical. And everywhere a loss of the secret, of distance, and of the mastery of illusion.

We have completely forgotten the form of sovereignty that consists of the operation of simulacra as such. But culture has never been anything but that: the collective sharing of simulacra, as opposed to the compulsory sharing of the real and of meaning today. Sovereignty lies only in the mastery of appearances, and complicity lies only in the collective sharing of illusion and secret.

Everything that forgets this scene and this mastery of illusion and veers toward the simple hypothesis and mastery of the real falls into the obscene. The mode of apparition of illusion is that of the scene; the mode of apparition of the real is that of the obscene.

There exists a terror, as well as a fascination, of the perpetual engendering of the same by the same. This confusion is exactly that of nature, the natural confusion of things, and only artifice can put an end to it. Only artifice can dispel this lack of differentiation, this coupling of same to same.

Nothing is worse than the truer than the true. Take the clone, or the automaton in the story of the illusionist. In the latter, what is terrifying is not the disappearance of the natural into the perfection of the artificial (the automaton made by the illusionist imitated every human movement so perfectly as to be indiscernible from the illusionist himself). It is, on the contrary, the disappearance of artifice into the obviousness of the natural. Here lies something unbearably scandalous. This lack of differentiation brings us back to terrifying nature. This is why the magician will instead counterfeit the real robot, with its slightly mechanical rigidity of motion, to restore, against the terror of resemblance, the play and power of illusion.

That which is no longer illusion is dead and inspires terror. This is what the cadaver does, as does the clone, and more generally,

anything that can be so confused with itself that it is no longer even capable of playing its own appearance. This limit of disillusion is that of death.

Against the true of the true, against the truer than true (which immediately becomes pornographic), against the obscenity of obviousness, against this unclean promiscuity with itself that we call resemblance, we must remake illusion, rediscover illusion, this power, at once immoral and maleficent, to tear the same away from the same, called seduction. Seduction against terror: these are the stakes. There are no others.

The erasure of all scene, of all power of illusion, the disappearance of distance, of that space maintained by ceremonial or the rules of the game—the triumph of promiscuity in every domain. Eroticism and sexualization are only the expression of this mix-up, of this confusion of all roles. Psychology in particular, always ambiguous and unhappy, is linked to the loss of distinct scenic spaces and all rules of the game. The “other scene,” that of the unconscious and of fantasy, cannot make up for the loss of that more fundamental one of illusion.

Illusion is not false, for it doesn't use false signs; it uses senseless signs, signs that point nowhere. This is why it deceives and disappoints our demand for meaning, but it does so enchantingly.

This is what the image does in general, more subtly than the real, since it has only two dimensions and is therefore always more seductive (it really is the devil who peopled the world with them). The same is true of *trompe l'oeil*: adding the illusion of the real to painting, it is somehow falsier than false—a second-degree simulacrum.

Seduction is also falsier than the false, since it uses signs, which are already semblances, to make them lose their meaning—it abuses signs and subjects. Someone who has never lost the

meaning of a word or a look cannot know what this loss is, that of abandoning oneself to the total illusion of signs, to immediate control by appearances, that is, going beyond the false into the absolute abyss of artifice.

The false does nothing but intrigue our sense of truth; the falser than false carries us beyond this, and ravishes us without the possibility of appeal. In the real world the true and the false balance each other, and what is gained by one is lost to the other. In the movement of seduction (this also applies to the work of art) it is as if the false were resplendent in all the power of the true. It is as if illusion were resplendent in all the power of truth. What can we do about any of this? No more real, no more meaning holds. When a form is resplendent with inverse energy, when the energy of the false shines with the power of the true, or when the Good shines with the energy of Evil—when, instead of setting them in opposition to each other, a kind of singular anamorphosis guides the transposition of one form into the other, the transposition of one energy into its inverse, what could one oppose to this singular movement?

In this ascent to the limit a logic of the simultaneity of inverse effects comes into play. Perhaps we should radically oppose the effects of obscenity to those of seduction; but might it not also be necessary to accumulate them and grasp them together in their inextricable anamorphosis?

Thus, in the movement of money both the total obscenity and the secret illusion of value are combined in striking fashion.

Gaming is wonderful, because it is at the same time the locus of the ecstasy of value and that of its disappearance. Not its transgression in potlach and expenditure—that would still be Bataille's transcendental utopia, the ultimate dream of political economy. No, in gaming money is neither produced nor destroyed; it disappears as

value and rises again as appearance, returned to its pure appearance, in the immediate reversibility of gain and loss.

The obscenity of gaming is total, because there is no longer any appeal to any depth or value whatsoever: here money is naked, metamorphosed into pure circulation, pure fascination, formal passion, transparent, cold and superficial *jouissance*. Disembodied lewdness, the ecstatic form of value.

But the secret of gaming is also total: it is that money does not exist. It is like the secret of power: that there is none—or that of seduction: that desire does not exist. Money exists neither as essence, nor as substance, nor as value. And gaming returns it to its inexistence.

This is just the opposite of political economy and exchange, where money is loaded with the whole symbolic operation of value. Here, money is distributed as pure simulacrum, relieved of all obscenity and circulating only according to the arbitrary rules of the game.

The secret of gaming is that money has no meaning. It exists only as appearance. There the substance of value is volatilized by the play of appearances, by the arbitrariness of play.

If money can self-generate so insanely, just as numbers can be multiplied by a simple mental operation, it is possible only because it does not exist. It's like in the game where one is supposed to memorize as many words as possible; you get much further when you can forget the meaning of the words.

This is not a matter of consumption or spending; you must passionately believe in money and value in order to consume them, just as you must believe passionately in the law in order to transgress it. Those are hot passions. Here, one must believe in nothing; you must have a secret, that of the nonexistence of money, if not its

power of appearance and metamorphosis (or what amounts to the same thing, the absolute power of simulation of gaming). It is a cool passion, a form of cold ecstasy. Calculation is part of it, as are the rules and anything that shares in the savage ritual of appearance. Calculation here functions as a mask, with the same intensity as the mask. It regulates, beyond appearances, the play of mobile divinities, the hidden objectivity behind the subjectivity of appearances.

But if the false can be transparent with all the power of the true—such is the sublime form of illusion and seduction—the true, too, can be transparent with all the power of the false—and this is the form of obscenity.

This is the obscene: the truer than true, the fullness of sex, the ecstasy of sex, pure and empty form, the truly tautological form of sexuality (tautology alone is perfectly true), the joining of same to same. It is sex caught in its own exhibition, fixed in its organic, orgasmic excrescence, like the body in obesity, or cells in cancerous metastases. Not a vile, caricatured and simplified form of sexuality, but the logical exacerbation of the sexual function, the more sex than sex, sex elevated to the set power—what is obscene is not the copulation of bodies, but rather the mental redundancy of sex, the escalation of truth which leads to the cold vertigo of the pornographic.

This is the very same process that leads to the enchanted vertigo of seduction. The full through which only the empty appears (this spectacular absence of sensuality and pleasure is the failure of the pornographic universe)—that is the obscene. The fading of sense, the ephemerality of the sign through which the most extreme pleasure appears—that is seduction. But in both cases we see a quality outbid itself in its reaching towards its pure form, its ecstatic radiation.

And it is not only a quality which can go into such ecstasy; the absence of a quality can do so as well: there is an ecstatic radiation of the neutral, and the neutral itself can be potentiated. This leads to something monstrous, monstrous effect, a good part of which comes from obscenity. Pornography is precisely an art of exhibiting the neutral, of the compulsory radiation of the neutral.

Essentially sexual obscenity is pious and hypocritical, for it distracts us from conceiving of obscenity in its general form. This is characteristic of any form that becomes fixed in its apparition, that loses the ambiguity of absence to exhaust itself in an exacerbated visibility.

More visible than the visible—this is the obscene.

More invisible than the invisible—this is the secret.

The scene is in the order of the visible. But there is no longer a scene of the obscene; there is nothing but the dilation of the visibility of all things to the point of ecstasy. The obscene is the end of any scene. Furthermore it is a bad omen, as its name indicates. For this hypervisibility of things is also the imminence of their end, the sign of the apocalypse. All signs carry it on themselves, and not only the infrasensual and disembodied signs of sex. Along with the end of the secret, it is our fatal condition. If all enigmas are resolved, the stars go out. If everything secret is returned to the visible (and more than to the visible: to obscene obviousness), if all illusion is returned to transparency, then heaven becomes indifferent to the earth. In our culture everything is sexualized before disappearing. This is no longer sacred prostitution but a sort of spectral lewdness taking hold of idols, signs, institutions, discourses; the allusion, the obscene inflection that takes hold of every discourse, is the surest sign of their disappearance.

There is no obscenity when sex is in sex, or when the social is in the social and nowhere else. But today it overflows everywhere, like sexuality—we speak of the social “relationship” like the sexual “relationship.” This is no longer a mythical, transcendent sociality, but a pathetic sociality of rapprochement, of contact (as in lenses), prosthesis, reassurance. It is a social in mourning, an incessant group hallucination of its lost determination. The group is haunted by sociality like the individual is by sex—both are haunted sexually by their disappearance.

Today we are all social workers. What is this social, that is no more than work? That no longer even believes in its own existence in fact or in law, that believes only in its forced reproduction, in the framework of a market where it sees itself as subjected, like any other commodity, to the law of scarcity, production and exchange? And also to advertising, since everywhere in the media, in ideology and in discourses, it is the social that does its own advertising.

In a world where the energy of the public scene, the energy of the social as myth and illusion (whose intensity is maximal in utopias) is in the process of disappearing, the social becomes monstrous and obese, and dilates to the dimension of a kennel, a mammary body, cellular and glandular. Once exemplified in its heroes, it is now indexed on its handicapped, defectives, degenerates, feeble-minded, and asocial—in a gigantic enterprise of therapeutic nursery school.

The social can exist only within certain limits, where it is imposed as something at stake, as myth—I would almost say as destiny, as a challenge, and never as reality, in which case it is annihilated in the game of supply and demand. The body also is annulled in the game of sexual supply and demand, and it, too, loses that mythical power which makes it an object of seduction

As for the social, one can say that its obscenity is today fully realized; it is that of the body you don't know how to get rid of, or more exactly it enters the accursed phase of decay. It is then, before drying out and taking on the beauty of death, that the body passes through a truly obscene phase and must at all costs be conjured and exorcized, for it no longer represents anything, no longer has a name, and its unnamable contamination invades everything.

Everything that is imposed by its objective presence, that is, by abjection, everything that no longer possesses either the secret or the lightness of absence, everything that, like the rotting body, is given over solely to the material operation of its decomposition, everything which, with no illusion possible, is surrendered to the sole operation of the real, everything which, without mask, makeup or face, is given over to the pure operation of sex and death—all this can be called obscene and pornographic.

Many things are obscene because they have too much meaning, because they take up too much space. They thus attain an exorbitant representation of the truth, that is to say, the apogée of the simulacrum.

When everything is political, it is the end of the political as destiny; it is the beginning of the political as culture, and means the immediate impoverishment of this political culture.

When everything becomes cultural, it is the end of culture as destiny; it is the beginning of culture as politics, and means the immediate impoverishment of this cultural politics.

The same is true for the social, for history, economy, and sex. The point of maximal extension of these categories, once distinct and specific, marks a point of banalisation and the inauguration of a transpolitical sphere that is first of all that of their disappearance. The end of fatal strategies—and the beginning of banal strategies.

We thought we discovered something subversive when we affirmed that the body, sports and fashion were political.

We have only precipitated their indifferentiation into an analytical and ideological fog—a little like discovering that all illnesses are psychosomatic. A wonderful discovery, but one which gets you nowhere: it just assigns them to a more poorly defined category.

Everywhere the widely accepted obviousness of a generalization of this order—political, cultural, social, sexual, psychological—marks its death sentence. Interdisciplinary structures in all their forms are symptoms of this: every discipline is aligned on the degenerated concepts of another.

Or else, with this *mélange* of concepts and categories, as with the mixing and promiscuity of the races, one should imagine the baroque effects of transfiguration—effects visible in America in the violence of indifference, the violence of juxtaposition, the violence of promiscuity—the new scene of the obscene. It is as if obscenity has been transfigured by acceleration, by the corpuscular speed of bodies, signs, and images.

Obscenity takes on all the semblances of modernity. We are used to seeing it, first of all, in the perpetration of sex, but it extends to everything that can be perpetrated in the visible—it becomes the perpetration of the visible itself. Murderous prostitution, like certain hyperreal films from South America, where the sadistic violence on the screen is perpetrated for real during the filming. A murderous aberration? This is not so certain, for it is consistent with the fantasy of the integral restitution of the real, and of the resurrection of detail characteristic of porn, but also of “retro,” in the register of the past, or of the “rendered” and the “lived” in the register of life pure and simple.

Porn is after what can be rendered from sex, and “retro” aims at what can be rendered from the event, the cultural trait and the historical character—almost hallucinated in its detail and expurgated of all nostalgia by virtue of its overexact signs. This really is exaction: you expel things into the real, and force them to mean something. But perhaps things are never “true” except at this price: being led under too garish a light, with too high a standard of fidelity.

So from here on everything real has passed into pornographic hyperreality, all of the present has passed into “retro,” and that entire charming little music of meaning has passed into the stereophony of signals which lulls us to sleep.

This is the obscenity of everything that is tirelessly filmed, filtered, reviewed and corrected under the wide-angle lens of the social, of morality and information. Those lives extorted right on television, the whole of *la France profonde* made to submit to public confession and contrition, even animals are subjected to educational blackmail: previously you could see a giraffe giving birth on a live broadcast; today the program goes to a school, where we see the animals as seen by children, etc. The slightest film will be shown only at the price of an aimless and idiotic discussion: the soft technology of culture, outrageous socialization, the rampant obscenity of uninterrupted social commentary.

Solicitation, sensitivization, being plugged in, targeting, contact, connection—all this terminology is that of a white obscenity, one of dejection and uninterrupted abjection. This is the obscenity of change, of this ferocious fluidity of signs and values, of this total extroversion of behaviour into the operational.... The white and impersonal objectivity of polls and statistics—the masses having to reveal their secrets, even if they don’t have any. Everyone must deliver his secret, cross the threshold of silence and enter the

immanent space of communication, where even that minimal dimension of looking is erased. Looking is never obscene, whatever one says about it. What is obscene, on the other hand, is that which can no longer be looked at, nor, it follows, seduced—everything, animate or inanimate, that can no longer be enveloped by the minimal seduction of the glance and is doomed, naked and with no secret, to immediate devouring.

Obscenity is the absolute proximity of the thing seen, the gaze stuck in the screen of vision—hypervision in close-up, a dimension without any distance, the total promiscuity of the look with what it sees. Prostitution.

We, particularly in the West, devour faces like sexes, in their psychological nudity, in their affectation of truth and desire. Stripped of masks, of signs, of ceremonial, they shine, in effect, with the obscenity of their demand. And we submit to the solicitation of this unfindable truth, and spend all our energy on this vacuous decipherment. Only appearances, that is to say, signs that do not let meanings filter through, protect us from this irradiation, this loss of substance in the empty space of truth.

The face stripped of its masks is no more than a sexual organ; the body stripped of its appearances is naked and obscene (although nudity can clothe the body and protect it from obscenity).

It is doubtless impossible to strip a body or a face totally of its appearances and yield it up to the pure concupiscence of looking, to strip it of its aura and yield it to the pure concupiscence of desire, to strip it of its secret and yield it to the pure operation of decipherment. But we shouldn't underestimate the power of the obscene, its power to exterminate all ambiguity and all seduction and deliver us to the definitive fascination of bodies without faces, faces without eyes, and eyes that don't look. Maybe this, by the way,

is what attracts us in advance: a perfectly ecstatic and obscene universe of pure objects, transparent to each other, which would shatter against each other like pure kernels of truth.

This obscenity drags away with it whatever remained of an illusion of depth and the last question that could still be asked of a disenchanted world: is there a hidden meaning?

When everything is oversignified, meaning itself becomes impossible to grasp. When all values are overexposed, in some kind of indifferent ecstasy (including the social in the socialism of present-day France), it is the very credibility of the value which is annihilated.

Thus there could have been a kind of ruse on the part of traditional pornography. Porn basically says: there is good sex somewhere, since I am its caricature. There is some measure, since I am its excess. But this is precisely the question: is there good sex somewhere, sex as an ideal value of the body, as a "desire" that must be liberated? The virtual state of things, that of total explicitness of sex, answers: no. Sex can be perfectly liberated, perfectly transparent, without desire and without pleasure (it still functions).

This same question was put to political economy: beyond the exchange-value incarnating the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, is there some good substance to value, some ideal use-value of commodity which can and should be liberated? We know very well that the answer is no, that use-value has disappeared over the horizon of exchange-value and was only a paradoxical dream of political economy.

This is the very issue of the social: above and beyond, beneath this terrorist and hyperreal sociality, this ubiquitous blackmail of communication, is there some good substance to the social, some ideality of

social relationship that can and should be liberated? The answer is obviously no: the equilibrium and harmony of a certain social contract has disappeared over the horizon of history, and we are doomed to this diaphanous obscenity of change. We mustn't believe we are living the realization of some evil utopia—we are living the realization of utopia, period. That is to say, its collapse into the real.

The same is true for theater and scenic illusion.

Baroque theater was still a kind of extravagance of representation. Indissociable from feasts, fountains, fireworks, machine-like artifices (the great mechanical technologies were inaugurated then, in the production of theatrical illusion) the scenic illusion (of the stage) is total. Just like *trompe-l'oeil*, its contemporary simulacrum, more real than the real, but without trying to confuse itself with the real: on the contrary: by virtue of machines, artifact, technique, and counterfeit the real is challenged according to its own rules. Likewise for perspective in painting from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century: the way it is used is often illusionist and operatic. It remains a staging, a strategy of appearances, not of the real—illusion keeps its power without giving up its secret (there isn't any).

But we will make it confess anyway. We will capture theater in the trap of representation. Starting in the eighteenth century, it becomes loaded with the "real"; the stage moves away from machine-like simulation and the metaphysics of illusion, and the naturalist form wins out. The stage trades the prestige of metamorphosis for the discreet charm of transcendence. The critical era of theater begins, the contemporary of social antagonisms, psychological conflicts, and of the critical age in general.

There is still something at stake, however, at the level of this representation. Theater, even if it no longer has the energy of

metamorphosis or the sacred effects of illusion, retains a critical energy and a sort of sacrilegious charm—this includes the separation of the stage from the audience, also a critical form, a space of transcendence and judgment.

Artaud is no doubt the latest figure who has wanted to save the theater by tearing it from the decaying scenario of the real, anticipating the end of representation, and reinjecting it, by virtue of cruelty, with something prior even to illusion and simulacrum, something of the savage operation of sign upon reality or of the lack of distinction between the two that still characterizes theaters of the unreal (the Peking Opera, Balinese theater, and sacrifice itself as a scene of murderous illusion).

Today this critical energy of the stage—not to mention, of course, its power of illusion—is in the process of being swept away. All that theatrical energy goes into the denial of the scenic illusion and into antitheater in all its forms. If for a while the form of theater and the form of the real were in dialectical play with each other, today it is the pure and empty form of theater which plays with the pure and empty form of the real. Illusion is proscribed; the scission between stage and audience is abolished; theater goes down into the street and into everydayness; it claims to invest the whole of the real, dissolve into it, and at the same time transfigure it. The paradox is at its height. All the “exploded” forms of animation, creativity and expression, happening and acting out—theater takes on the form of a generalized therapeutic psychodrama. This is no longer the famous Aristotelian catharsis of the passions. Rather, it is a treatment of detoxification and reanimation. Illusion is no longer valid here: it is truth which bursts into free expression. We are all actors and spectators; there is no more stage: the stage is everywhere; no more rules: everyone plays out his own drama, improvising on his own fantasies.

The obscene form of antitheater, present everywhere.

But also that of antipedagogy and antipsychiatry, where madness and knowledge are lost in psychodramatic complicity, as well as of antipsychoanalysis, where the analysand and the analyst end up exchanging roles. Everywhere a stage disappears, and everywhere the poles that sustained intensity or difference are stricken with inertia.

Or that of artificial resurrection, which is one of the forms obscenity takes. One of the most significant turns of events is seeing the scene of work—also in the process of disappearing—reactivated, vacuum-packed, so to speak, in the German factory-simulacra where the psychosocial lived experience of the work process is preserved for the use of the unemployed, and in the absence of any “real” production. A marvelous hallucination of the modern world: the unemployed are paid to reperform gratuitously, so to speak, the same actions as for production, but in a sphere that is now perfectly useless. This is truly the ecstasy of work; they are living out the ecstatic form of work. And at the same time, there is nothing more obscene or more melancholy than this parody of work. Here the proletarian becomes a cellophane-wrapped whore.

This white obscenity, this escalation of transparency, reaches its peak in the collapse of the political scene.

From the eighteenth century on, the latter is moralized and becomes serious. It becomes the locus of a fundamental signified: the people, the will of the people, social contradictions, etc. It is called upon to fulfil the ideal of a good representation.

‘While previous political life, like that of the court, was played out in a theatrical mode, with a basis in play and machination, now there exists a public space and a system of representation (the break

occurs simultaneously in the theater with the separation of stage and audience). This is the end of an aesthetics, and the beginning of an ethics of the political, just like some figurative space, from now on no longer assigned to scenic illusion, but to historical objectivity.

This ethical crystallization of the political scene engenders a long process of repression (just as linguistic structuring engenders a repressed of the sign). The obscene has its birth here, in the off-stage, in the shadows of the system of representation. It is therefore first of all dark: this is what foils the transparency of the scene, just as the unconscious and repression destroyed the transparency of consciousness. The obscene is what is neither visible, nor representable, and thus possesses an energy of rupture, of transgression, and a hidden violence. This is traditional obscenity, of the sexually or socially repressed, of what is neither represented nor representable.

It's otherwise for us: obscenity today is, on the contrary, that of over-representation. Our own radical obscenity is no longer that of the hidden and the repressed, it's the transparency of the social itself, emergence of the social (and of sex) as meaning, reference, evidence. A total reversal has taken place. And if obscenity was once only a secondary trait of the repressed? If it was once the Hell of Representation—as they talk about the Hell of the National Library—conveying the charm of interdiction, its fantasies and perversions, today it bursts out as the principle characteristic of the repressed, exploding the visible scene into a kind of ecstatic representation.

In the beginning was the secret, and this was the rule of the game of appearance. Then there was the repressed, and this was the rule of the game of depth. Finally comes the obscene, and this is the rule of the game of a world without appearance or depth—a transparent universe. White obscenity.

Everything obscene is a matter of surface. But there are no more secrets beneath these superficialities. What was kept secret, or even what didn't exist found itself expelled forcibly into the real, represented beyond all necessity and all resemblance. Forcing of representation. As with porn: an orgasm in color and close up is neither necessary nor convincing—it is merely implacably true, even if it is the truth of nothing at all. It is only abjectly visible, even if it represents nothing at all.

For something to be meaningful, there has to be a scene, and for there to be a scene, there has to be an illusion, a minimum of illusion, of imaginary movement, of defiance to the real, which carries you off, seduces or revolts you. Without this properly aesthetic dimension, mythical, ludic, there is not even a political scene where something can happen. And this minimal illusion has disappeared for us: there is no necessity nor credibility for us in the events of Biafra, Chile, Poland in terrorism, inflation and nuclear war. We are exposed to an over-representation of these things by the media, but still we can't really imagine them. All of that, for us, is simply obscene, since images in the media are made to be seen but not really looked at, hallucinated in silhouette, absorbed—like sex absorbs the voyeur: from a distance. Neither spectators, nor actors—we are voyeurs without illusion.

If we're anesthetized it's because there's no more aesthetics (in the extended meaning of the word) of the political scene, no more stakes, rules of the game. For information and media are not a scene, a prospective space, or something that's performed, but a screen without depth, a tape perforated with messages and signals to which corresponds a receiver's own perforated reading.

Nothing can compensate for this loss of all scene and illusion—in the automatic simulation of the social, in the automatic

simulation of the political. Especially not the discourses of politicians, all compelled to simulate each other's pathetic gesticulation—pornographers of indifference whose official obscenity redoubles and calls attention to the obscenity of a world without illusion. Furthermore, nobody cares. We are in the ecstasy of the political and the historical—perfectly formless and impotent, in perfect solidarity, yet paralyzed, perfectly frozen in a worldwide stereophonic complex, transpoliticized alive.

Today there is no longer transcendence, but the immanent surface of the development of operations, smooth surface, operational, of communication. The Faustian, Promethean period of production and consumption yields to the Protean era of networks, to the narcissistic, equally Protean form of branching, contact, contiguity, feedback, and generalized interface. As with television, the entire surrounding world, and our own body, becomes a control screen.

The decisive changes in objects and the modern environment arise from a drift toward formal operational abstraction of elements and functions, toward their homogenization in a single virtual process, toward the displacement of gestures, bodies, affects in electric and electronic control, toward the miniaturization in time and space of processes whose real scene is that of infinitesimal memory and the microprocessor.

The time has come of a miniaturization of time, bodies, pleasures. There is no longer any ideal principle for these things on the scale of the human. There are no longer any but nucleated effects. This change from the human scale to the nuclear one is obvious everywhere: this body, our body, appears basically superfluous, useless in the extension, multiplicity and complexity of its organs, tissues, functions, since everything today is concentrated on the

brain and genetic formula that resume themselves an operational definition of being. The countryside, the geographically immense countryside, seems a desert body whose very extension is needless (and that eventually it is even boring to traverse), since all events crystallize in the cities, themselves in the process of reduction to a few miniaturized showplaces. And time: what to say about this immense free time that is left to us, too much time, by far, that envelopes us like a vague terrain, a dimension henceforward useless to explore, since instantaneity of communication has miniaturized our exchanges into a succession of instants?

We are no longer in the drama of alienation, we are in the ecstasy of communication.

The private world was certainly alienated, because it separated us from others, but it reaped also a symbolic benefit from the alienation, which is that there is such a thing as difference to suffer or enjoy, as the case may be. So the consumer society was lived under the sign of alienation, as society of the spectacle; but still the spectacle is only spectacle, it is never obscene; obscenity starts when there is no longer a scene, when everything becomes inexorably transparent.

Man already denounced the obscenity of the commodity, linked to the abject principle of its free circulation. The obscenity of the commodity comes from its abstraction, formal and light, against the weight and density of the object. The commodity is readable: contrary to the object, which never confesses completely its secret, the commodity manifests always its visible essence, which is its price. It is the formal place of transcription of all possible objects: through it they all communicate—it is the first great medium of communication of the modern world. But the message it delivers

is extremely simplified, and it's always the same: it is exchange-value. Basically, therefore, the message already no longer exists; it's the medium that imposes itself in its pure circulation.

We have only to extend this analysis of Marx of the obscenity of the commodity to decipher the universe of communication.

Not only the sexual becomes obscene in pornography, today there's a whole pornography of information and communication, circuits and networks, a pornography of functions and objects in their readability, fluidity, availability, regulation, polyvalence, compulsory meaning, free expression.... This is the obscenity of what is entirely soluble in communication.

To the black obscenity succeeds a white one—to the hot obscenity, a cold. The two imply a form of promiscuity: one is that of the viscera in the body, objects piled up in the private universe, of what swarms in the silence of repression—organic promiscuity, visceral, chanel. The other is more a matter of surface saturation, incessant solicitation and an extermination of interstitial space.

I lift my telephone receiver, that's it, the whole marginal network hooks into me, annoys me, with the intolerable good faith of all that pretends to communicate. Free radio: talks, sings, expresses—wonderful!—all of that, a fantasy of contents. In terms of media the result is: a space, that of FM, finds itself saturated, stations on top of one another mix to the point that there is no further communication. Something that was free is no longer so at all—I no longer even get to the point of finding out what it is I want to hear, so saturated is the space, so urgent is the pressure from all that wants to be heard.

I fall into the negative ecstasy of radio. There is certainly a proper state of fascination linked to this delirium of communication,

and therefore a singular pleasure. If you follow Caillois in his classification of games—games of expression, competition, chance, vertigo—then the drift of contemporary culture is from forms of expression and competition toward aleatory and vertiginous forms that are no longer games of scene, mirror, challenge, duel games, but rather ecstatic, solitary and narcissistic games, where pleasure is no longer a dramatic and aesthetic matter of meaning, but an aleatory, psychotropic one of pure fascination. And this is by no means a negative judgment, since we are certainly dealing here with a basic mutation in the forms of perception and pleasure. We would be poor judges of the consequences of this phenomenon, if we try to apply the criteria and reflexes of our traditional sensibility to it; we would doubtless be misunderstanding the potentialities of the event in this new sensorial sphere.

One thing is certain: the scene makes us passionate, but the obscene fascinates us. In fascination and ecstasy, passion disappears. The hot universe is investment, desire, passion, seduction, and also, according to Caillois, expression and competition. The world of ecstasy, obscenity, fascination, on the other hand, and also, following Caillois, of the aleatory and vertiginous, is cold, cool (vertigo is cold, even a drugged one).

In any event we'll have to tolerate this compulsory extraversion of all interiority and this forced irruption of all exteriority that signifies properly the categorical imperative of communication. Should we call upon the metaphors of pathology? If hysteria was the pathology of the exacerbated drama of the subject, pathology of expression, theatrical and operational conversion of the body—if paranoia was the pathology of the rigid and jealous organization and structuring of the world on the other hand, with communication,

information and the immanent promiscuity of all networks, with this cultural branching, we would instead be inside a new form of schizophrenia. No more hysteria, properly speaking, or projective paranoia; it is the normal state that terrifies the schizophrenic: the too-great proximity of everything, unworldly promiscuity of all things, that contact, invest, penetrate each other without resistance: no protective aura, not even the body envelopes one. The schizo is deprived of all scene, open to all in spite of himself, and in the greatest confusion. He is himself obscene, the obscene prey of the world's obscenity. What characterizes him is less his light-years distance from the real, a radical break, than absolute proximity, the total instantaneousness of things, defenseless, with no retreat; end of interiority and intimacy, overexposure and transparency of the world that traverses him without his being able to interpose any barrier: for he can no longer produce the limits of his own being, and reflect himself; he is only an absorbant screen, a spinning and insensible plate for all the networks of influence.

If it was true, if it were possible, this obscene and generalized ecstasy of all functions could well be the state of desired transparency, of reconciliation of subject and world, that would be for us basically the Last Judgment; and it already would have taken place.

Two alternatives, equally possible: nothing has yet happened, our unhappiness comes from nothing having really begun (liberation, revolution, progress)—finalist utopia. The other eventuality is that everything has already happened. We are already beyond the end. All that was metaphor has already materialized, collapsed into reality. This is our destiny: the end of the end. We are in a transfinite universe.

Ironic Strategies

WE HAVE TRANSGRESSED EVERYTHING, including the limits of scene and truth.

We've really gone beyond. Imagination is in power; light, intelligence is in power, we're living, or soon will be living, the perfection of the social. Everything is here, heaven has come down to earth, the heaven of utopia, and what existed in profile as a radiant perspective is now lived as a catastrophe in slow motion. We can almost taste the fatal flavor of material paradises; and transparency, which was the ideal maxim for the age of alienation, is realized today in the form of a homogeneous and terrorist space—hyperinformation, hypersensibility.

No more black magic of the forbidden, alienation and transgression, but the white magic of ecstasy, fascination, transparency. It's the end of the pathos of law. There will be no Final Judgement. We've passed beyond it without realizing it.

Too bad. We're in paradise. Illusion is no longer possible. It has always braked the real, but now no longer holds; and we are witnesses to the unfurling of the real in a world without illusions. Even the historical illusion which maintained the hope of the convergence in the infinite of the real and the rational, and thereby a metaphysical tension, is dissipated: the real has become the rational.

This conjunction has been realized under the sign of the hyperreal, ecstatic form of the real. All metaphysical tension has been dissipated, yielding a pataphysical ambiance, that is, the tautological and grotesque perfection of the truth processes. Ubu: the small intestine and the splendor of the void. Ubu: full and obese form, grotesquely immanent, strikingly true, a figure of genius, replete with that which has absorbed everything, transgressed everything, and radiates in the void like an imaginary solution.

Would God have fallen into this strategy, unworthy of him, of reconciling man with his own image, at the end of a Last Judgement that would bring him indefinitely closer to his ideal goal? Fortunately not: God's strategy is such that he maintains man in suspense, hostile to his image, elevating Evil to the power of a principle and marvelously sensitive to any seduction that turns him away from his goal.

There is no reality principle, nor one of pleasure. There is only a final principle of reconciliation and an infinite one of Evil and Seduction.

Beyond the ecstasy of the social, of sex, of the body, information, the Evil Principle keeps watch, evil genie of the social, the object, irony of passion.

Beyond the final principle of the subject there stands the fatal reversibility of the object, pure object, pure event (the fatal), mass-object (silence), fetish-object, femininity-object (seduction). Everywhere today, after centuries of triumphant subjectivity, the irony of the object lies in wait for us, an objective irony readable at the very heart of information and of science, at the very heart of the system and its laws, at the heart of desire and of all psychology.

The Evil Genie of the Social

Neither the morality nor the positive value system of a society makes for progress, but rather its immorality and vice.

It is never the Good nor the Virtuous, whether it be the ideal and platonic one in morality, or the pragmatic and objective one in science and technology that controls the changes or the vitality of a society; the catalytic impulse comes from debauchery, whether of images, ideas or signs.

The rational systems of morality, value, science, reason command only the linear evolution of societies, their visible history. But the deeper energy that pushes even these things forward comes from elsewhere. From prestige, challenge, from all the seductive or antagonistic impulses, including suicidal ones, which have nothing to do with asocial morality or a morality of history or progress.

Competition is stronger than any morality, and competition is immoral. Fashion is more powerful than any aesthetic, and fashion is immoral. Glory, our ancestors would have said, is more powerful than merit, and glory is immoral. The debauchery of signs, in every domain, is much more powerful than reality, and the debauchery of signs is immoral. Gambling, whose rules are immemorial, is more powerful than work, and gambling is immoral. Seduction, in all its forms, is more powerful than love or interest, and seduction is immoral.

This is not, nor was it with Mandeville either, a cynical philosophical view, but an objective view of societies, and possibly of all systems of thought. The energy itself is cynical and immoral: no thinker who follows only the logic of his concepts has ever seen farther than the end of his nose. You must be cynical or perish, and

this, if we may say so, is not immoral; it is the cynicism of the secret order of things.

It is not that individuals or groups would obey some secret instinct, but the fact remains that the powers which have attempted to extirpate this disobedience, this debauch, this evil genie, by annihilating everything right up to the “irrational” motivations in the mind of man, have always condemned people to a more or less slow death. The energy of vice is irreplaceable, precisely because it is an energy of fission and rupture, for which they have very naively wanted to substitute a mechanical energy of production.

How do our supposedly rational and programmed societies function? What makes them work, what makes whole populations run? Scientific progress, “objective” information, the increase of collective happiness, the understanding of facts and causes, the proper punishment for the guilty, or the quality of life? Not at all: none of this interests anyone, except in reply to public opinion polls. What fascinates everyone is the debauchery of signs, that reality, everywhere and always, is debauched by signs. This is the interesting game, and this is what happens in the media, in fashion, in publicity and more generally, in the spectacle of politics, technology, science, in the spectacle of anything at all, because the perversion of reality, the spectacular distortion of facts and representations, the triumph of simulation is as fascinating as catastrophe—and it is one, in effect; it is avertiginous subversion of all effects of meaning. For this effect of simulation, or of seduction, as you please, we are ready to pay any price, much more than for the “real” quality of our life.

This is the secret of advertising, fashion, gambling, of all the lewd systems that break apart moral energies and liberate immoral energies, those that feed gaily on the signs of things alone, in defiance of their truth. In this, they go back to magical and archaic

energies which have always gambled on the omnipotence of thought against the power of the real world, immoral energy that shatters meaning, that traverses facts, representations, traditional values, and electrifies societies blocked in their Platonic images.

A good example of this “diabolical” power of change, this immoral energy of transformation, for and against all value systems, is the United States. In spite of its morality, puritanism, obsession with virtue, and pragmatic idealism, everything there changes irresistibly according to an impulse that is not at all one of progress, by definition linear—no, the true motor is the abjection of free enterprise. Still both social and wild even today, refractory to any coherent social project: everything there is examined, paid for, promoted and fails according to that standard. West Coast music, therapies, sexual “perversions,” the skyscrapers of the East, leaders, gadgets, artistic movements, all parade by in successive waves in the same ceaseless rhythm. And our own cultural unconscious, deeply nourished on culture and meaning, can howl in dismay at the sign of this spectacle; the fact remains that it is there, in the immoral promiscuity of all forms, all races, in the violent spectacle of change in which lies the success of a society and the sign of its vitality.

Publicity, abstract, abject circulation of Eurodollars, stock prices, immorality of fashion cycles, useless technologies of prestige, electoral parades, arms escalation, all this is not only the historical sign of the domination of capital, but the most decisive proof of a fact more important than capital itself: the proof that no social project worthy of the name has ever really existed, that in the end no group has ever really conceived itself as social, that is to say in solidarity with its own values and coherent in its collective project, in short, there has never been even the shadow nor

the embryo of a responsible collective subject, nor even the possibility of an objective of this kind.

Public morality, collective responsibility, progress, the rationalization of social rapports—nonsense! What group has ever dreamt of that? Sociologists and ideologues, yes, and politicians who have lost precisely this sense of politics, of the imposture and fallacy of politics, which is not just the quality of Machiavelli's Prince, but also, if you follow Mandeville into the abysses of the social, the Machiavellianism of society in its real functioning.

The energy of the social as such, the energy of the social contract and of its idealization in socialism, is an impoverished energy. It is a reasonable energy, a slow and artificial energy. But one can easily see that this isn't what people obey; it's only their history. Even the Revolution, which can be seen as the culminating point of this "conscious" energy, is not history's final word on the subject. As Rivarol says: "The people didn't really want a Revolution, they wanted a spectacle of it." Is there anything more deceitful than this? More immoral? (Especially when it's a matter of Revolution!—but, rest assured: when it's a question of wanting order, the people are only interested in the spectacle of it.)

If our perversion lies in this, that we never desire the real event, but its spectacle, never things, but their sign, and the secret derision of their sign, it means that we don't really want things to change; the change must also seduce us.

In order for Revolution to come it has to seduce us, and it can do that only by signs—it's in the same situation as today's politicians laboring for election. But you can wind up paying a very high price for being seduced, for however meaningful Revolution can be

historically, only its spectacle is sublime. And what will we choose? Why do people who have paid so dearly for their Revolution so frequently, to the regret of its advocates, allow it to languish in indifference, treating the “event” like so much bad luck, having sacrificed their life to the spectacle of Revolution?

It is this cunning impulse that delivers us from terror.

Another example of an immoral society living off its own profound immorality: Italy. Why isn't Italy morose (as France is, even socialist)?

Doubtless because it is the only society to have crossed, collectively, the virtual threshold of simulation—a collective virtuosity for living in the at once derisory and subtle order of simulation. It does not desperately fight—and this is the reason why life there is in the end happier—this loss of substance, value and sense which makes others unhappy and depressed. Others live in a state of thwarted simulation; Italy, for the most part, lives in a state of joyous simulation. There, law has already—and maybe it always has—yielded to the game and the rules of the game. All Italians, from the Red Brigades to the secret service, from Momma to the Mafia, from earthquake victims to the P2 Cell (miracle of the State become secret society!) are somehow in complicity, maintaining an ironic connivance in the theatricality and now in the simulation of power, law, living order or disorder—a secret pact sealing the strategy of appearances that dominate all of this. The pact also concerns the *trompe-l'oeil* effect of the political and social which comes into play and is undone in a twitch, as well as the intense pleasure we take in effects (here we are not far from the Renaissance model). The true social distribution is the collective distribution of seduction.

What cement could be more fantastic than that? What could you find, collectively or individually, beyond the fission of referential

worlds, but the fiction and ironical strategy of appearance? And it's not the French socialism from beyond the grave that will convince us otherwise, for it only plays on the unhappy appearance of the social, incarnated in the funereal statue of Commander Mitterrand and the moral bureaucracy of his Companions.

Does not this secret disobedience of a group to its own principles, this profound immorality and duplicity, reflect a universal order? We need to reawaken the principle of Evil active in Manicheism and all the great mythologies in order to affirm, against the principle of Good, not exactly the supremacy of Evil, but the fundamental duplicity that demands that any order exists only to be disobeyed, attacked, exceeded, and dismantled.

Primitive people did not see it any differently, and we know they had a vision of their gods much different from our own: they invented them only to put them to death, and drew their energy from this intermittent sacrifice. With the Aztecs, the gods sacrifice themselves one by one in order to give birth to the sun, the moon, the people. In order for something to come alive the god who incarnates it has to die.

That is the basic rule: for a group or an individual to live, it can never aim at its own good, its own interest, its own ideal. It always has to aim elsewhere, to the side, beyond, off center, like the combatant in the Japanese martial arts. It is useless to attempt to reconcile these two principles. Duplicity is strategic and fatal.

This is exactly what Bataille saw with his concept of expenditure and accursed shares. It is precisely the superfluous, the excessive that is essential. It's there that all the stakes converge, where the energy of a society is fomented. The social is thus no

longer a contractual organization for the management of a group's interest (which, then, would only be the management of misery, including and especially the penury of the social itself—the principle of economics begins with the fact that there's never enough for everyone, Bataille's principle with the fact that there's always too much for everyone, and that excess is our destiny), but rather a risky, precarious organization, possibly even absurd, a project of devastating energy, an antieconomy, a prodigy, a challenge to conservative nature. The social is a luxury; our own merely characterizes the poverty of our societies.

Another encouraging sign: the extraordinary collective fascination and passion of a people to sacrifice or to see sacrificed its chief, when the occasion offers itself. We should not underestimate this properly political passion for empowering men or castes whom people then continually watch collapse or whom they themselves hasten to their end.

This is only the political version of the law of reversibility and a form of political intelligence at least equal, if not superior, to that of the social contract and delegation of power, which it exalts only to deny. Of course people choose leaders and obey them, of course they invest their representatives with power and legitimacy. But can we suppose that there doesn't always remain the logical necessity to take vengeance on them? Power, whatever it is and wherever it comes from, is a symbolic murder and it must be expiated by murder. We may also be sure that every society is perfectly cognizant of this, at the very moment when it puts someone in power and this someone, if he is intelligent, is perfectly conscious of it as well. This goes back to the rule of the game which says that a group or an individual should never aim at its own preservation. Neither should power, if it really wants to be effective in its exercise, aim at

its own continuity: it should somehow desire its own death. Lacking which it falls into the illusion of power, in the ridiculousness of perpetual engendering, and perpetual ceding of power. If it doesn't understand this it will be swept away. If the group doesn't understand it, it will itself be lost. The institution of power is based on the equal necessity of its dissolution.

Even modern leaders, although obsessed with their permanence and not given to ritual sacrifice, sense this rule and do not hesitate to stage their demise and death through assassination attempts that are more or less orchestrated. Certain of them, moreover, do not always escape unharmed, but that is not the important thing, for in this case, too, merely dying is of no use, you have to know how to fade and pass away. And the property of modern systems, bureaucratic or administrative, is no longer knowing how to die, no longer knowing how to do anything but succeed themselves. Today's leaders believe in their virtue because they believe in designation by the people. They have only banal strategies of power. But other politicians have always known that power is never this unilateral ability of disposing of another's will, but always the subtle and ambiguous orchestration of its own disappearance. They know that power, like truth, is the empty place you must know how never to occupy, but that you must know how to produce so that others will be swallowed up in it. On the other hand, power that insists on occupying this place, power that incarnates power, is obscene and impure, and sooner or later it collapses, amidst blood and ridicule.

Furthermore, a strategy of intelligent subversion would also be to avoid aiming directly at power, but rather to force it into occupying this obscene position of absolute obviousness. For it is there that, mistaking itself for real, it falls into the imaginary—it's there that it no longer exists except to violate its own secret.

This was the nonconcerted tactic of May '68: to force power to coincide with its own nonsimulated exercise—precisely through multiple decoys—and to make power appear as repressive, an apparently naive and useless objective.

What's the use of sacrificing oneself to prove this? But there lay the trap: forcing it to be more repressive than it was in reality. The demonstrators thus in truth exercised a power of simulation, by obliging power to add to repression the obscenity of repression. And that is what kills: simulation is always the most effective weapon. It's enough to annihilate yourself in front of what opposes you to oblige that force to turn against itself with all the power of its inertia. May '68 therefore was not an offensive action (power would win that battle hands down), but a defensive simulation, which is to rob power of its own secret (precisely that it doesn't exist) and so to leave it defenseless before its own enormity.

We should remember that power revolves around a secret monstrosity, and that to elevate someone to power is to plunge that person into the difficult exercise, always on the verge of ridiculousness, of privilege without any counterpart. He can manage the situation only through ambiguity and duplicity. If you end all uncertainty in the exercise of his rule you condemn him absolutely.

The very principle of Evil is in objective irony and in the strategies that emanate from it.

All epochs, philosophies, and metaphysics have formulated at some moment (manicheans, heretics, cathars, witches, but also Nervalians, Jarryites, Lautreamontists) the hypothesis of the derivativeness and the fundamental unreality of the world, that is to say,

really of a Principle of Evil, and they have always been persecuted and burned for this, the ultimate sin.

The unreality of the world and its corollary, the omnipotence of thought, were rigorously conceived only by societies that were missing the real (rather than by societies without history or writing). All mythologies, all dawning religions have lived by a violent denial of the real, a violent defiance of existence. And all that denies and defies the real is certainly the closer for it to making a world out of thought alone.

We've made irony a Mephistophelian form, but it is only what filters all things and saves them from confusion. It filters words, spirits, bodies, concepts, and pleasures and protects them from amorous promiscuity or coagulation. It plays from one form to another, in anamorphosis, and it plays from one species to another, in metamorphosis—and thus the copulation of humans and gods in the Greek myths is ironic. The difference between gods and humans, and between humans and beasts, is a seductive philter. When like couple with like, everything becomes obscene. The necessity of irony, like that of pleasure, is part of the necessity of Evil.

The Evil Genie of the Object

By the beginning of the twentieth century science recognized that any means of microscopic observation provokes such an alteration in the object that knowledge of it becomes imperiled. This is already a revolution because the conventional hypothesis of an objective reality and science is thereby abandoned, but the principle of experimentation itself was left intact. What was at stake was only certainty, and what was established in its place was a new convention, that of

uncertainty. The results became relative to the functioning of science itself as a medium—but this relativization somehow testifies to a supreme pride: “My certainty stops at the reading of the instruments,” says a microphysicist. Or again: “Is the plate on which this particle of light stops not in fact its ‘cause’? Can we really speak of the photon before (or after) having captured it on a screen or photographic plate?” In the human sciences the equivalent, intuited but never analyzed for its ultimate consequences, is the presupposition and induction of any possible response by the question itself, and therefore the vanity of analysis and interpretation (many, of course, are not bothered by such scruples).

This is, however, only a limited revolution, in the sense that no other hypothesis is entertained than that of an altered object, submitted to the violence of the means of observation without the possibility of response (except by attributing this to the insoluble problem of our inability, like Orpheus’ Eurydice, to summon an object without making it disappear), or else an object condemned to total simulation, that is to say, projected into the aleatory form of models.

The hypothesis is never entertained, beyond an object’s being distorted, of its active reply to the fact of being questioned, solicited, violated.

Perhaps unhappy with being alienated by observation, the object is fooling us? Perhaps it’s inverting its own answers, and not only those that are solicited? Possibly it has no desire at all to be analyzed and observed, and taking this process for a challenge (which it is) it’s answering with a challenge. We sense this victorious ruse of the analyzed object very definitely in the so-called human sciences (when we prefer not to forget it). There we can already register a point of no return, where not only every position of the analytical subject is

stricken with relativity and uncertainty, but where supremacy is completely inverted: today the analyzed object triumphs everywhere, by its very position as object, over the subject of analysis. It escapes the analyst everywhere, pushing him back to his indeterminate position of subject. By its complexity it not only overflows, but also annuls the questions that the other can ask of it. In the reversibility even natural processes baffle all solicitation (reversibility is the absolute weapon against the determination, of whatever kind, that one tries to impose on phenomena, but it does not spare indeterminacy, either, for reversibility is not a matter of chance, but would rather be a kind of perfectly inverted and simultaneous determination, or perverse counter determination). Pushed into retreat by analysis, the objects become reversible, just like appearance; pushed into retreat by meaning, they metamorphose. The subject of analysis has become fragile everywhere, and this revenge of the object has only just begun. It is itself part of a general reversibility.

Worse: perhaps the subject will see itself one day seduced by its object (which is quite natural), and it will become once more the prey of appearance—which is by far the best thing that can happen to it, to it and to science.

This kind of reversibility, this turning of knowledge into an enigmatic duel between the subject and the object, this form readable, until the present, in the sphere of language: physicists themselves sense it at the limits of the “exact sciences” of matter.

Measurements made on a particle do not allow us to say what would happen with another particle produced under the same conditions. A measurement made on a particle, a photon for example, disturbs the experimental apparatus to such a degree that another particle separated from the first by an infinite distance, equal on our scale to several light years, instantly produces an echo of this movement.

“A measurement propagates its long-range effects at a speed greater than that of light. The photons awaken each other, send information back to the light source, and think up ways to avoid the disturbance caused by the system of observation. The photons communicate: it’s fantastic. And to do so it seems that they employ instantaneous interactions at a distance—beyond the limit of the speed of light. Energy coming from the future could modify the present state of the system.”

How to resist the faster-than-light irony of these photons with their ultra-rapid secret service, defying any analytic apparatus? At all events this hypothesis of an active and refractory response of a non-inertia of “matter,” an irreducible antagonism, and to tell it like it is, a duel-to-the-death between the subject, whoever he may be, as he has been hypostatized in analysis, and the object, whatever it might be, which this subject claims to subordinate to his calculations and manipulations—this hypothesis is fascinating. When you think about it, it is fantastically obvious. It is the (“scientific”) hypothesis of the dead objectivity of the universe that is implausible. If one wishes to be a materialist, one should by no means attribute to matter this inertia and passivity, but instead a genie, even an evil one, able to undo all attempts to subjugate him.

Until now reversibility has in effect remained metaphysical. (“If the universe can be explained as an effect of a cause, it is naturally because cause and effect cannot be considered as equivalent and interchangeable terms. Just as a mixture of water and ink cannot in the end be redivided into two distinct liquids... every physical phenomenon remains subordinate to the irreversibility of the chain of cause and effect.”) But it may now be in the process of disturbing the physical order and shaking it to its very foundations.

With it disappears the rational principle that prevents the effect from turning back on the cause to cancel it out; it prevents the effect from being the cancellation of the cause or prevents there never having been causes, but a pure and simple chain of effects. Reversibility kills any determinist (or indeterminist) principle of causality in ovum, in the egg. And when I say “in the egg” I mean it in the sense of the riddle of the chicken and the egg—which comes first?—the famous aporia of causal linkage; even the causal order does not escape parodic circularity, which is somehow the revenge of the reversible order.

Stories of reversibility are always the funniest, like the one about the rat and the psychologist: the rat tells about how he ended up by perfectly conditioning the psychologist to give him a piece of bread every time he lifted the gate of his cage. Based on this story you could imagine, on the level of scientific observation, that the experiment would have been faked—not involuntarily altered by the observer, but faked by the object, with the purpose of amusement or vengeance (as in the unintelligible trajectories of particles), or better yet: that the object only pretends to obey the laws of physics because it gives so much pleasure to the observer.

Such would be the pataphysics (the science of imaginary solutions) that lies in wait for all physics at its inadmissible limits.

Anticipate the desire of the other, reflect his demand like a mirror, satisfy it in advance: we can scarcely imagine what power of deception and absorption, entrapment and diversion—in a word, of subtle revenge—there is in this instantaneous seduction. Likewise the manner in which the masses become blurred as reality on the horizon of simulated systems of capture, such as polls or the photographic plates for particles; or else, the way these selfsame events

hide behind the screen of media and television. For it is true that events, like particles, have no probable existence beyond the deflecting screen—no longer a reflecting one, like a mirror. The mirror was the place of imaginary reproduction of the subject, the screen (by which I mean networks, circuits, perforated tape, magnetic tape, simulation models, all systems of recording and control, all the surfaces of inscription) is rightfully the place of its disappearance. The light from a television, it has been pointed out, is endogenous; it comes from within and reflects nothing. Everything happens entirely as if the screen itself were the cause and origin of the phenomena that appear there, so serious are the consequences of the current sophistication of the systems of “objective” capture that they have annihilated the very objectivity of their processes.

The other, the object, disappears on the horizons of science. The event, the meaning, disappears on the horizons of the media.

But one may see that the disappearance itself can also be a strategy—not a necessary consequence of the information system, but a strategy proper to the object, for which the monitor’s screen would serve somehow as a screen of disappearance.

To this cathodic recording surface the individual or the masses reply by a parodic behavior of disappearance. What are they, and what do they do behind this screen? They make themselves into an impenetrable and unintelligible surface, which is a way of fading. They eclipse themselves, they melt into the shallow screen, in such a way that their reality, like that of particles of matter, can be radically cast into doubt without affecting the probabilistic analysis of their behavior. In “reality,” behind this “objective” fortification of networks and models which think they capture them, and where a whole population of investigators, analysts, scientists, observers (as well as mediaticians and politicians) is in motion, there passes a

whole wave of derision, reversion, and parody which is the active exploitation, the parodic set-up by the object itself of its own method of disappearance!

The media make the event, the object, the referent, disappear. But perhaps they only serve as support for a strategy of disappearance which would be that of the object itself?

The masses destroy and eclipse the individual. But perhaps for the individual they represent the long dreamed of occasion to disappear?

The media provide no response. But perhaps they are only the surface which the masses take advantage of to remain silent?

It might still be a matter of seduction, but exactly of the opposite kind—no longer the subversion of the masses by the media, but instead the subversion of the media by the masses, in their strategy of disappearance on the horizon of the media.

Just as the observation of a particle under given conditions does not allow us to draw any conclusions as to the behavior of another particle under these same conditions, so everything happens as if individuals and masses only comply so well with analytical models and polls to make them more indeterminate. Polls are indeterminate; this is their charm, so to speak, and they are charming because they are screens behind which the object has disappeared to such a degree that we can no longer make decisive statements about its causal existence, nor about the effective consequences of the models. This results in a justified suspicion or a general casualness regarding the value of polls, a kind of spontaneous “verdict of simulation,” a verdict of incredulity and mistrust, which today extends to everything that is delivered to us via the media and information, and even science. We record everything, but we don’t believe it, because we have become screens ourselves, and who can ask of a

screen to believe what it records? To simulation we reply by simulation; we have ourselves become systems of simulation. There are people today (the polls tell us so!) who don't even believe in the space shuttle. Here it is no longer a matter of philosophical doubt as to being and appearance, but a profound indifference to the reality principle as an effect of the loss of all illusion. All the old structures of knowledge, the concept, the scene, the mirror, attempt to create illusions, and thus they emphasize a truthful projection of the world. Electronic surfaces, on the other hand, are without illusion; they offer only the inconclusive.

It is this that makes good old critical and ironical judgement no longer possible. We used to be able to say about something, in order to unmask its rhetoric: "It's only literature!"; to reveal its artificiality: "It's only theatre!"; to denounce its mystification: "It's only a movie!" But we cannot say, in order to denounce anything: "It's only TV!" Because there is no longer a universe of reference. Because illusion is dead or because it is total. The day we will be able to say: "It's only TV! It's only information!" will be the day when everything will have changed.

Perhaps it will be when we have had more experiences like that of *Capricorn One*, where an exhibition to Mars, essential to American prestige, and prevented at the last moment, is instead wholly staged in TV studios in the desert, with simultaneous, life-like retransmission on screens all over the world. Why not? Simulation is no crime. Credibility is only a special effect, and even space, cosmic space, is for us only a shallow screen. Spatial effect becomes special effect.

A screen, whether TV or survey, represents nothing. It's a mistake to think that polls can be representative of anything at all, as a word can be of a thing, an image of a reality, or a face of inner feelings. The

electoral system can still claim that it is representative, because it stages a relative dialectic of representatives and the represented. But this isn't the case here. The model, unlike the concept, is not of the order of representation, but of simulation (virtual, aleatory, dissuasive and nonreferential), and it is a total misunderstanding to apply to it the logic of a representative system. From this arise all the misunderstandings and the unending useless polemics on their worth and "good use" (as in the ad: Séguéla / Mitterrand: Who has brought in socialism?) Absurd and insoluble: there is a confusion of two heterogeneous systems whose postulates cannot be translated from one into the other. An illogical projection of an operational, statistical, international simulatory system on a traditional value system, on a system of representation, will and opinion. The misunderstanding is enough to crystallize an entire moral philosophy of information.

However you perfect them, polls will never represent anything, because the rule of their game is representation. Their logic is perfectly attuned to objectivity, but at the end of the process there is no object: this is therefore objectivity in its pure state. Marvelous mockery! This is true for all of the media: when you're in simulation, that is, in the neither true nor false, all moral science is perfectly hypocritical. It is equally implausible to speak of an ethics of polls (or of the media) as of an ethics of fashion—impossible to find as soon as the domain of style is no longer to play on an opposition between beautiful and ugly, but on the indistinguishability of the two and the undifferentiated whirling of the two in a generalized effect of seduction.

Furthermore, even supposing that one could perfect polls to the point of total reliability and could credit the information with some degree of truth, that would be the beginning of the drama.

For this ideal snapshot that you would obtain from the social would amount to absolving us from its dramatic feasibility. This truth would mean that the social had been vanquished by the technique of the social. Which, in fact, is exactly the diabolical objective of all simulation. It is there that the soft technology of extermination begins. This is why the real problem begins with the hypothesis of effective functioning, for what is critical is not the distortions of truth inside the machine, but the distortion of everything real by the objective reliability of this machine.

How sweet was information in the days of truth! How sweet was science in the days of the real! How sweet was objectivity in the time of the object! How sweet was alienation in the days of the subject! Etc.

We should therefore believe neither those who exalt the beneficial use of the media nor those who complain about manipulation, for the simple reason that there is nothing in common between a system of meaning and a system of simulation. Advertising and polls are quite incapable of alienating the will or the opinion of anyone, for the simple reason that they don't operate in this space-time of will and representation where judgement is formed. For the same reason it's quite impossible for them to shed any light on anyone's will or opinion, since they are foreign to the scene of opinion, at once theatrical and representative, that constituted the very scene of politics. So we may rest assured that they cannot possibly destroy this scene. But let us not have any illusions about them either: they have nothing to teach us.

It's this dehiscence or hiatus between the two systems that today plunges us collectively into a state of hebetude and uncertainty as to our own will to choice, opinion, and judgment. We will never know if an advertisement or a public Opinion poll has really influenced

anyone's will or not, but we will never know what would have happened if there had been no advertising or surveys, either. The screen that media (information) weaves around us is a screen of total uncertainty. And of totally new uncertainty—since it is no longer the kind that results from a lack of information, but one that comes from information itself, from an excess of information. Unlike traditional uncertainty, which could always be resolved, this one is irreparable and, therefore, will never be lifted.

Such is our destiny as the polled, the informed, the measured: confronted with the anticipated verification of our behavior, absorbed by this permanent refraction, we are never again confronted with our own will or with that of the other. We are no longer even alienated, for there is no more other; the scene of the other, like that of the social and political, has disappeared. Each individual is forced into the undivided coherence of statistics. Extraversion without appeal, like uncertainty.

The obscenity proper to polls comes not from their betrayal of the secret of an opinion, the intimacy of a desire, or from the violation of some imprescriptible right of the private person (if there really was a secret, no one, not even its keeper, would be able to betray it), but from statistical exhibitionism, from this continual voyeurism of the group spying on itself. At every moment it must know what it wants, what it thinks, it must see itself in numbers on the video screen, decipher its temperature curves, in a sort of hypochondriacal mania—the social is obsessed with itself, it becomes its own vice, its own perversion. Overinformed, it becomes obese with itself.

The masses also are made of this useless gluttony of information that claims to enlighten when it only encumbers space and cancels itself out in silent equivalence.

No one can do anything about this circularity of the masses and information. The two phenomena fit each other: the masses have no opinions, nor does information inform them: one and the other continue monstrosly to feed each other the speed of the rotation of information increasing the weight of the masses, but not at all their level of consciousness.

All of this would be dramatic if there was an objective truth of needs, an objective truth of public opinion. The influence of advertising, polls, media, information (the pollution of the pollution of consciousness), all this would be dramatic if we were certain that there existed a human nature and social essence somewhere with their own values and will. For that would pose the eternal problem of alienation.

We need to go even farther and revise all utopias tied to information theory. Things have gone very rapidly since the beginning of the century. Today it is information itself, the excess of information that is pushing us along the road of a general involution.

Today knowledge about an event is only the degraded form of this event. A lower form of the energy of the event. Likewise knowledge about opinion is only a degraded form of this opinion.

When knowledge, through its models, anticipates the event, in other words, when the event (or opinion) is preceded by its degraded form (or its simulated form) its energy is entirely absorbed into the void.

The total predictability of the universe, such as the one science aspires to, constitutes in this sense the most degraded form of the universe. Could it be that the counterfinality of science and information is in a position to forestall the end of the world by a

systematic though unconscious degradation, purposely lost in an inverted utopia, that of saving the world through information (though there seem also to have surfaced some flickerings of bad conscience)?

Assembling the maximum amount of information on the universe can put an end to the world. As in the fable of the nine billion names of God: when, thanks to the computer, we've been able to decline them all, the world will end, and the stars will go out.

Information would thus be the only way of putting an end to the universe, which would never run down by itself.

But there is perhaps another, more joyous way of seeing things, and of finally substituting for eternally critical theory an ironic theory.

If in fact you consider the inconclusiveness of polls, the uncertainty of their effects, close to divinatory meteorology, if you consider that they say whatever they want, that everyone already knows it, doesn't believe, does nothing with them (but always demands ever more of them), their capability of simultaneously validating contradictory tendencies, or, when the results are unacceptable, piously falsifying their objectivity (as with polls on the death penalty and immigration), but especially the perpetual denial we oppose to them, even and particularly if they "verify" our behavior—no one accepts being "verified," nor coinciding with his probabilities, and no one can live in the anticipated image of what he is, nor in the exorbitant mirror of his statistical truth. (An amusing example of this stubborn denial of statistical chance in the very act of its application: "if it makes you feel safer, the Paris Underground Transport Authority has calculated that if fifty people take the subway twice a day for sixty years only one will be attacked. There is no reason it should be you!"). Just as the gambler doesn't

believe in chance but only in Luck (with a capital letter: Grace, not probability), likewise no one gives up on destiny; this is why no one believes in statistics.

At all events the greatness of statistics is not in their objectivity but in their involuntary humor.

And that's how one has to take things, in terms of their humor. To the basic casualness with which the polls treat the social and social phenomena corresponds a similar casualness in their reading and use. And to the seriousness with which they claim to treat the social there is a reply by way of the ferocious irony of their very failure and of all those aleatory distortions. There is something like a humorous providence that sees to the derailing of this all too smoothly running machine, and that arranges for it to trap itself in the mirror of objectivity. A sort of absolute weapon emerges from the depths of the social (?), that of a radical dissimulation in response to the simulation of response staged by polls and statistics. This is what one could call the evil genie of the object, the evil genie of the masses, eternally blocking the truth of the social and its analyses.

The object is never innocent, it exists and takes revenge. The flawed refraction of the luminous ray of information on the "matter" of the social is neither an accident nor an imperfection in the system, it comes from the genie of the object, from an offensive resistance of the social to its investigation, and which takes the form of an occult duel between master pollsters and the polled, between the masses and the political class, etc. In this duel all the naiveté comes from the side of the manipulators, for whom it is assumed that one can at all events oblige the object to deliver its truth for its own good. If it doesn't understand the questions, if it answers incorrectly, if it answers too well, if it asks questions itself, it is understood that this

is only a form of maladjustment to the analytical set-up. Science, through some fantastic aberration, believes itself always assured of the complicity of its object. It underestimates its vices, derision, nonchalance, false complicity, anything that could make the process ironic, anything that feeds the original strategy, which may even be victorious, of the object as opposed to that of the subject.

If you understand the polls in this sense, you see that they achieve exactly the opposite effects of their stated objective. They function as a spectacle of information (information is like revolution: people care only for its spectacle), therefore as a mockery of information and of the political class.

The involuntary humor of polls (and the sly pleasure that we take in this "scientific" phantasmagoria) comes from the fact that they erase all political credibility.

Who are these people who need polls in order to decide, for whom testing takes the place of strategy? They are dispossessed of any initiative, and caught in the trap of the medium to which they entrust their power. All media conceal this dazzling trap: they annihilate the political function of a society and thus satisfy the ironic unconscious of the masses, whose deep instinct remains the symbolic murder of the political class.

The people, who have always served as alibi for the representative system, indemnified itself by allowing itself the spectacle of a political scene. Today it takes revenge through the spectacle of its own disappearance. We think we're polling it, while day after day it enjoys the home movies of the fluctuations of its own opinion in its reading of the polls.

It is only in one sense that the people believe in polls, that we all believe in them, as a game of predicting an evil outcome, a bet of double or nothing on a gaming table. A game of the equal finality

of all tendencies, effects of truth, and of the circularity of questions and answers, etc. Are we perhaps all thereby inaugurating a collective form of ironic existence that, in its great wisdom, no longer questions its own grounds and can only accept its own capture in the spectacle of its disappearance?

The best example of this is the masses. They are not at all an object of oppression and manipulation. The masses do not have to be liberated and, in any case, they cannot be. All their (transpolitical) power is in being there as pure object—that is to say, in opposing their silence and their absence of desire against any political wish to make them speak. Everyone tries to seduce, solicit, invest them. Atonal, amorphous, abysmal, they exercise a passive and opaque sovereignty; they say nothing, but subtly, perhaps like animals in their brute indifference (although the masses are “essentially” rather harmonic or endocrinic—that is, antibodies), they neutralize the whole political scene and discourse. If these seem today so empty, if no stakes, no project can still mobilize a political scene that remains committed to artificial theatrics and the effects of useless powers this is due to the massive obscenity of this enormous silent antibody and to the retractility of this unnameable “thing” that has the absurd bestial power of suction and absorption of the monsters of science fiction: which in effect feeds its inertia on all the accelerating energy of the system with the myriad pieces of information that the system secretes to try to exorcize this inertia and absence.

Nothing can be done about it. The masses are pure object, that which has vanished from the horizon of the subject, that which has disappeared from the horizon of history—just as silence is the

pure object that disappears from the horizon of the word, and the secret is the pure object that disappears every day from the horizon of meaning.

The stupefying power of the mass-as-object. The masses incarnate the pure object of the political, that is to say, the ideal of an absolute power, a power of death over the social body, they are the incarnation of a terrifying dream of power—and at the same time they are its empty object, its null and void materialization, the radical antibody, inaccessible to all political subjectivity and therefore perfectly useless and dangerous. The political scenario is reversed: it's no longer power that pulls the masses in its wake; it's the masses that drag power down to its fall. Likewise, political men, in the mood, as it were, for seducing the masses, would do well to ask themselves if they are not going to be cannibalized in return and if they won't have to pay for their simulacrum of power by being devoured, like the male by the female after copulation.

Anything that was once constituted as an object by a subject represents for the latter a virtual death threat. No more than the slave accepts his servitude does the object accept its compulsory objectivity. The subject can attain only an imaginary mastery of it, ephemeral at all events, but will not escape this insurrection of the object—a silent revolution, but the only one left now.

This revolution will not be symbolic, dazzling, and subjective, but obscure and ironic. It won't be dialectical, it will be fatal. Against the seduction of every object stripped of its sense, against the possibility for any object to be an object of seduction and dread, any strategy will be a good one.

All information, the incessant activity of the media, the mass of messages, aims only at conjuring away this mortal contamination.

Informational, “mediatic,” communicated energy is expended today only for the purpose of tearing a bit of sense, a bit of life from the cold and indifferent antibody, from this silent mass whose attraction grows ever greater. We need to coalesce all the centrifugal forces to escape from this force of inertia. From now on, information can at bottom have no other meaning than this.

There is and always will be a major difficulty in analyzing media and the sphere of information through the traditional categories of the philosophy of the subject: will, representation, choice, liberty, knowledge and desire. For it is obvious that they are absolutely contradicted there and that the subject is totally alienated in its sovereignty. There’s a basic contradiction between this sphere, that of information, and the moral law that still masters us and that says: Thou shalt know thy will and desire. Looking at it this way, neither the media nor technology and science teach us anything; rather they have pushed back the limits of will and representation, shuffled the cards and taken from each subject the disposition of his own body, his desire and his own choice and liberty.

But this idea of alienation was never more than an ideal perspective of philosophy for the use of the hypothetical masses. It never expressed anything but the alienation of the philosopher himself, that is, of one who thinks he is other. Hegel is very clear about this in his judgement on the *Aufklärer*,* on the Enlightenment philosopher who denounces the “reign of error” and scorns it.

It’s enough to reverse this idea—the masses alienated by the media—to appreciate how much the whole media universe, possibly even the entire technical world, results from a secret strategy of the supposedly alienated masses, from a secret form of denial of will, from an involuntary challenge to all that was asked of the

subject by philosophy and morals, that is, a challenge to any exercise of will, knowledge, or liberty.

This would be no longer a matter of revolution but of a massive *devolution*, of a massive delegation of power and responsibility either to political and intellectual systems or technical and operational ones. Massive *de-volution* and withdrawal of the will. Not by way of alienation or voluntary servitude (the mystery of which remains total since Boethius, as soon as the problem is posed in terms of the subject's consent to his own slavery, in terms of renunciation of the subject of his own being; but does he really have one?)—but by another sovereign philosophy of the involuntary, of the “un-will,” by a kind of antimetaphysics whose secret is that the masses (or Man) know with certainty that they don't need to pass judgment on themselves or on the world, that they don't have to will, know, or desire. The deepest wish is perhaps the wish to hand one's desire over to another. A strategy of disillusion with their “own” desire, disillusion with their own will, a strategy of ironical investment, of expulsion toward others of philosophical, moral and political injunction.

That's what the professionals are there for, the tenants and lieutenants of the concept and of desire. All of advertising and information, all of the entire political class are there to tell us what we want, to tell the masses what they want—and we basically assume this massive transfer of responsibility with joy, because it is simply neither obvious, nor of great interest to know, to will, to have faculties or desires. Who has imposed these upon us but the philosophers?

Choice is an ignoble imperative. Any philosophy that assigns man the exercise of his will can only plunge him into despair. For if, on the one hand, nothing is more flattering for consciousness than to know what it wants, on the other hand, nothing is more seductive for the other consciousness (the unconscious?), that obscure

and vital one which makes happiness depend on the despair of the will, than *not* to know what it wants, to be at the same time delivered from choice and diverted from its own objective will. It makes more sense to give in to some insignificant whim than to be suspended on your own will or on the necessity of choosing. Brummel had a servant for that. Before a splendid landscape constellated with lakes, he turns to his valet to ask: "Which lake do I prefer?"

Not only do people surely not want to be told what they want, but they don't even want to know it, and it's not even certain that they want to want. Faced with such a solicitation, it is their evil genie that whispers in their ear to leave it to the advertising or information systems to "persuade" them, to make a choice for them (or to leave to politicians the job of making things better), just like Brummel with his servant.... So who is being trapped?

The masses know that they know nothing and they have no desire to know. The masses know they are powerless, and they don't want power. We reproach them vigorously for these signs of stupidity and passivity. But they're not that at all: the masses are very snobbish; they act like Brummel and sovereignly delegate the faculty of choice to someone else, in a sort of game of irresponsibility, ironic challenge, sovereign lack of will, or secret ruse. All mediators (political, intellectual, heirs to the philosophers of the Enlightenment in their contempt of the masses) are only good basically for this: to administer by delegation, by proxy, this tedious business of power and will, to relieve the masses of this transcendence for their greater pleasure, and then to reward them with the spectacle of it. Vicarious*, to recall Veblen's concept, the status of these "privileged" classes, whose will would have been diverted, without their realizing it, toward the secret finalities of the very masses they despise.

We live all of this, subjectively, in a paradoxical mode, since these masses coexist in us with the intelligent and voluntary being who condemns and scorns them. No one knows what the true opposite of consciousness is—unless it be this unconscious of repression that psychoanalysis has imposed upon us. But perhaps our true unconscious is in this ironic power of withdrawal, of nondesire, nonknowledge, silence, absorption then expulsion of all powers, wills, of all enlightenment and depths of meaning, because of an insistence which is thereby bathed in the light of a ridiculous looking halo. Our unconscious might not be composed of desires properly sworn to the sad destiny of repression. It might not even be repressed at all. It would instead be made up out of what's left after this joyous expulsion of all encumbering superstructures of being and will.

We always had a sad vision of the masses (alienated), a sad vision of the unconscious (repressed). Upon our entire philosophy lies the heavy weight of these sad correlations. If only for the sake of change, it would be interesting to conceive of the masses, the object-masses, as possessing a delusive, illusive, allusive strategy, corresponding to an unconscious that is finally ironic, joyous and seductive.

The Evil Genie of Passion

About love you can say anything, but you don't know what to say. Love exists, and that's about it. You love your mother, God, nature, a woman, little birds and flowers: the term, become the leitmotif of our deeply sentimental culture, is the most strongly emotional one in our language, but also the most diffuse, vague, and unintelligible. Compared to the crystalline state of seduction, love is a liquid, even a gaseous solution. Everything is soluble in love, by love. The

resolution, the dissolution of all things into a passionate harmony or a subconjugal libido, love is a kind of universal answer, the hope of an ideal conviviality, the virtuality of a world of relations in fusion. Hate separates; love unites. Eros is what binds, couples, conjugates, foments associations, projections, identifications. "Love one another." Who ever could have said: "Seduce one another"?

I prefer the form of seduction, which maintains the hypothesis of an enigmatic duel, of a violent solicitation or attraction, which is a form not of response, but of challenge, of a secret distance and perpetual antagonism that allows the playing out of a rule—I prefer this form and its pathos of distance to that of love and its pathetic rapprochement. I prefer the dual form of seduction to the universal form of love. (Heraclitus: it is the antagonism of elements, beings and gods which comprises the game of becoming, not a universal solvent, or an amorous con-fusion—here the gods affront and seduce each other; and love, when it comes along with Christianity as the principle of creation, will put an end to this great game.)

It is possible to speak of seduction because it is a dual and intelligible form, while love is a universal and unintelligible one. It may be even that only seduction is truly a form, while love is only the diffuse metaphor of the fall of beings into individuation and the compensatory invention of a universal energy that would incline these beings to each other. By what providential effect, by what miracle of will, by what stroke of theatre would beings have been destined to love one another, by what crazy imagination could one conceive that "I love you," that people love each other, that we love each other? Here we are dealing with the wildest projection of a universal principle of attraction and equilibrium, pure phantasmagoria. Subjective phantasmagoria, modern passion *par excellence*.

Where there is no longer game or rule, a law and affect must be invented, a mode of universal effusion, a form of salvation to overcome the separation of souls and bodies, to put an end to hatred, predestination, discrimination, fate: this is our gospel of sentimentality, putting an end to seduction as fate.

This elevation of love to the highest level of divine right, to an ethical form of universal fulfillment (love still serves everywhere as moral justification for happiness), has thrown seduction into a vaguely immoral, vaguely perverse zone, a form of playing preliminary to love. Love remains the only serious or sublime finality, the only possible absolution for an impossible universe. Any concern with providing seduction with other titles of nobility runs up against mechanisms of sublimation and idealization which are those of love.

Seduction is linked not to affects but to the fragility of appearance; it has no model and seeks no form of salvation—it is therefore immoral. It obeys no morality of exchange; it is based rather on the pact, the challenge and the alliance, which are not universal and natural forms, but artificial and initiatory ones. It is therefore frankly perverse.

The matter is complicated further by the play of terminology. Neither seduction nor love being precise notions (they have no place in the great conceptual systems, nor in psychoanalysis), they can easily switch or be confused. So if one takes seduction to be a challenge, a game where the bets are never down, an uninterrupted ritual exchange, an infinite escalation of the ante, a secret complicity, etc., one can always answer: “But so defined, wouldn’t seduction be simply love?”

We can even invert the relation and make love something more decisive, more challenging than seduction. Love is fulfillment only

if you think of it, say, narcissistically: I love the other because he is like me, therefore I duplicate myself—I love the other because he is my opposite; therefore I complete myself. However, one can conceive of love as gratuitous, as an *élan* towards the other that expects no answer, as a challenge that incites the other to love me more than I love him, therefore as a perpetually higher bid, while one can also take seduction as endgame, a tactic that attempts to manipulate the other to one's own ends.

There's no argument possible against turning these terms around. Seduction and love may exchange their sublime and most vulgar meanings, which makes it almost impossible to talk about them. All the more so in that we are caught up today in a revival of the discourse of love, a reactivation of the affect by *ennui* and saturation. An effect of amorous simulation. Mad love, love as passion, are quite dead as heroic and sublime movements. What is at stake today is a demand for love, affect, passion, at a time when the need for it is cruelly felt. A whole generation has gone through the liberation of desire and of pleasure, a whole generation that is tired of sex and which reinvents love as an affective or passionate supplement. Other generations, romantic or postromantic, have lived it as passion, destiny. Our own is only neoromantic.

After so much sexual bathos, here we have the neopathos of the amorous relation. After the libidinal and instinctual, here is the neoromanticism of passion. But it is no longer a matter of predestination or fatality, it's only a matter of liberating one potentiality among others and, after such a long phase of "repressive desublimation," as Marcuse would say, of clearing the way for a progressive resublimation.

Sex—like the relations of production—was too simple. It is never too late to go beyond Marx and Freud.

There is, then, a kind of love that is only the froth of a culture of sex, and we shouldn't have too many illusions about this new apparatus of ambiance. Forms of simulation can be recognized by the fact that nothing sets them off from each other; sex, love, seduction, perversion, porn, can all coexist on one and the same libidinal band, without exclusivity, with the blessing of psychoanalysis. A stereophonic concerto: one adds love, passion, seduction to sex in exactly the same way psychosociology and "teamwork" were added to the assembly line.

This situation is interesting as a symptom of the exhaustion of a whole obscene constellation of sexuality (obscene not because of sex itself, but because of the obscenity of truth when it is spoken and revealed). We've come to the end of the cycle of sexuality as truth. This makes possible once again a reversion to forms whose profile and charm found themselves eclipsed by the hegemonic perspective of sex.

To find again a kind of distinction, a hierarchy for all these figures—seduction, love, passion, desire, sex—is without doubt an absurd wager, but it's the only one we have left.

In our culture, seduction has known a kind of golden age, which lasted from the Renaissance to the 18th century: it is then—like politeness, or court manners—a conventional, aristocratic form, a game of strategy without any special connection to love. The latter has for us tonalities that are different, ulterior, romantic and romanesque: no longer a game or a ceremony, it is a passion, a discourse. What sweeps you away is the force of desire; what calls you is death. It has nothing to do with seduction. Love, of course, knew courtly forms, in the Mediterranean culture of the thirteenth century. But the meaning it has for us was fashioned essentially at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth,

counter to the superficial game of seduction. There occurs a rupture between a form of dual game of strategic illusion and a new individual finality of fulfillment of desire, whose great advent is that of the constellation of desire, whether sexual or psychic, of the individual, or political desire of the masses. Whatever the case may be with this desire and its "liberation," it no longer has anything to do with the aristocratic game of challenge and seduction.

Another thing: seduction is pagan, love is Christian. It is Christ who begins wanting to love and to be loved. Religion becomes affect, suffering and love, none of which the archaic and ancient mythologies cared about in the least; for them the world's sovereignty resides in the regulated play of signs and appearances, in ceremonials of metamorphosis, and therefore in acts of seduction *par excellence*. No affect in any of this, no love, nothing like a great divine or natural flux, no need of psychology, either, of this subjective interiority where the myth of love will flower.⁴ Only the ritual exists, and ritual is in the realm of seduction. Love is born from the destruction of ritual forms, from their liberation. Its energy is an energy of the dissolution of these forms, including the magic rituals of the seduction of the world (which continued in Christian heresies, in the form of Manichean or revolutionary denials of the real world). Cruel, rigorous forms of the sign in its pure functioning, opposed

4. But if you take seduction in the Christian sense, then everything changes: seduction begins with Christianity; it is the diabolical curse that comes to fracture the divine order—or else it is Christ himself, according to Nietzsche, Christ come to seduce people to his own person, come to pervert them with psychology and love? Conversely, there is no seduction in Greece, where love is homosexual and pedagogic—a virtue, not a passion.

to the reality of the world, a mastery of pure appearances, without psychology, without affect, without love. The maximal intensity of these cultures—from which love and its entire metaphysics of salvation issue as if by decomposition—is an effusion of forms until then secret, initiatory, jealous of themselves, intensive, whereas love is a proselytizing energy, radiant and extensive—exoteric, whereas ritual is esoteric. Love is expression, heat, avowal, communication, and therefore a passage of energy from a potential, concentrated state to one that is liberated, radiating, caloric, and thereby endemic and degraded. It will therefore be the ferment of a popular and democratic religion, as opposed to hierarchical and aristocratic orders governed by rule.

Love is the end of the rule and the beginning of the law. It is the beginning of a disorder where things will be ordered according to feeling, affective investment, that is to say, a heavy substance, heavy with meaning, and no longer according to the play of signs—a lighter substance, more ductile, more superficial. God is going to love his own, which he had never done, and the world will no longer be a game. We have inherited all of this—and love is only the effect of this dissolution of rules and of the energy liberated by this fusion. The form opposite to love would then be observance: wherever a rule and a game are reinvented, love disappears. Compared to the regulated and highly conventional intensities of the game or the ceremony, love is a system of freely circulating energy. It is therefore charged with a whole ideology of liberation and free circulation; it is the pathos of modernity.

The distinctive quality of a universal passion like love is that it is individual and that everyone finds himself alone in it. Seduction is dual: I cannot seduce if I am not already seduced, no one can seduce me if he is not already seduced. No one can play without

another—that is the basic rule—while I may love without being loved in return. I love without being loved, that's my problem. If I don't love you, that's your problem. If someone doesn't please me, that's his problem. This is why jealousy is like a natural dimension of love while it is foreign to seduction—the affective bond is never absolutely sure, whereas the pact of signs is without ambiguity and without appeal. Furthermore, to seduce someone is not to invest him, nor to absorb him psychologically; seduction does not know this territorial jealousy that goes by the name of love.

I am not saying that love is only jealousy, but that some well-tempered jealousy always enters into it, something exclusive, some subjective claim. Perhaps it even precedes love: a primordial passion, as with the Greek gods, who know neither love nor sentimentality but are already tremendously jealous of each other.

To love someone is to isolate him from the world, wipe out every trace of him, dispossess him of his shadow, drag him into a murderous future. It is to circle around the other like a dead star and absorb him into a black light. Everything is gambled on an exorbitant demand for the exclusivity of a human being, whoever it may be. This is doubtless what makes it a passion: its object is interiorized as an ideal end, and we know that the only ideal object is a dead one.

In comparison to seduction, love would be, then, a looser form, a more far-reaching solution and even a way of dissolution. But a pathetic dissolution, at least in its more elevated forms, those that have produced the novel, for instance. This pathetic relief is going to disappear in the later peripety, which is simply that of sexuality. The latter becomes only a relational style articulated on the “objective” difference between the sexes. Seduction is still ceremonial, love is still pathetic, but sexuality is no longer anything but relational. From one form to another, what is at stake in signs is eliminated in

favor of organic, energetic, and economic functioning, based on the smallest possible difference, that between the sexes.

It's a mystification, in effect, to think of sexual difference as original difference, the source of all other differences, which would be only metaphors for this one. This is to forget that from time immemorial men have produced greater differential intensities through artificial systems than from bodies and biology. At least they have never thought of "natural" differences as anything but a particular example of artificial ones. Literally, pure sexual difference is of no interest. (Yin and Yang are another thing: these are two metaphysical poles between which exist the tensions that organize the world.) In certain cultures the differences warrior/nonwarrior, brahmin/nonbrahmin mean a lot more than sexual difference: they produce more differential energy, they organize things with more rigor and complexity. In all cultures except our own, the distinction between dead and alive, noble and ignoble, initiated and noninitiated, is infinitely more significant than the distinction between the sexes. Sexuality signals, in fact, with its biological and pretentious evidence, the weakest and poorest difference, the one that's left over after all other differences have been lost.

Any naturalistic principle of differentiation is necessarily weaker, and is far from being able to support—as is the powerful artifice of signs—a meticulous arrangement, a ceremony of the world.

Seduction is the era of an aesthetic and ceremonial difference between the sexes.

Love (passion) is the era of a moral and affective sexual difference.

Sexuality is the era of psychological, biological and political difference between the sexes.

This is why seduction is more intelligible than love: because it operates at the level of a higher form, a dual form, a perfect

differential form. Sex, of all differential forms, is the one where difference matters least. As to love, it is found always occupying an intermediary place in the spectral parade of figures: from the limits of seduction to the borders of sex, it describes a universe which goes from a pure form of difference to an equally pure one of indifference—but it doesn't have its own form and, as such, it is indescribable. It is not the dual form of seduction that is mysterious, it is, rather, the individual figure of the subject tracked by his own desire or in quest of his own image.

Destiny is imposed on us with stunning irrefutability: but it is nondestiny that needs to be explained. This, too, is all we can really do with it: rationalize it. Because somehow, profoundly, as with love's banality, there's nothing to say about it.

Seduction is not mysterious; it is enigmatic. The enigma, like the secret, is not unintelligible.

It is, on the contrary, fully intelligible, but it cannot be said or revealed. Such is seduction: inexplicable evidence. Such is the game. At the heart of any game is a fundamental, secret rule, an enigma; nevertheless, the whole process is no mystery; nothing is more intelligible than a game in progress.

Love itself is charged with all the world's mystery, but it's not enigmatic. It is, on the contrary, heavy with meaning, being of the order, not of the enigmatic but of the solution. "The key to the enigma is love," or more brutally: "Sex is at the bottom of everything." (Miraculous truth, revealed in the 20th century, but why? Don't believe a word of it: the enigma remains entire and retains all its seductive power.)

From one figure to the other, from seduction to love, then to desire, sexuality, finally to pure and simple porno; the farther you

go, the closer you come to the lesser secret, the smaller enigma, towards avowal, expression, unveiling, liberation of the repressed; the closer you come to truth, in a word, which soon becomes, in the obscenity of our culture, the compulsory statement of truth, the forced confession, the obliged revelation... of what, moreover? Of nothing, exactly. There is nothing to reveal.

From where could there have originated the crazy idea of revealing the secret, exposing the bare substance, touching radical obscenity? That, in itself, is a utopia. There is no real, there never was a real. Seduction knows this, and preserves its enigma. All other forms, and love in particular, are gossipy and prolix. They say too much, they want to say too much. Love talks a lot, it's a discourse. It declares itself and culminates often in this declaration where it is at an end. Highly ambiguous act of language, almost indecent; these things aren't said; how can you say to someone "I love you"? They appear too fragile to be wrapped in an enunciation, unless that is the only life they really have, in which case they are no longer secret at all. These things live only in their silence, or on their denial: "I don't love you at all," or even "I won't see you anymore," phrases still weighted with the challenge and suspense of seduction, imminence of love, but which still maintain, by the grace of denial, a quality of game, a lightness of lure.

Happily, anyway, "I love you" does not mean what it says, and it should be understood otherwise—in the seductive mood (all verbs have a secret mood, beyond the indicative and imperative, the seductive). Seduction is a modality of all discourse, including the discourse of love (at least, let's hope so). Which means that it plays games with its enunciation and affects the other differently than stated. So with "I love you"; isn't it said not to tell you you're loved, but to seduce you? It is a proposition that oscillates on its two sides,

and which thereby retains the insoluble charm of appearances, of what is senseless and therefore useless to believe. Believing “I love you” puts an end to everything, including love, since that would be to accord meaning to that which has none.

This is a best-case scenario, when ambiguity still controls discourse. In the case of sexual demand, there is no longer a trace of ambiguity. Everything is meant, all is said, there is no secret demand, all is in its expression. If desire is really being avowed, then it would be enough to hear the words of confession, the play of appearances would be useless. Likewise, “I love you” then takes on another meaning; it is no longer seductive, it is no more than a desperate optative: “I demand to love you,” “I demand that you love me.”

We can agree with Lacan: there is no sexual rapport, there is no truth of sex. Either “I love you” and “I desire you” mean something else entirely—seduction—or they signify a demand for the love of desire, never love or sex in themselves. There’s always a missed rendezvous, and sexuality, as Lacan has it, is the story of this missed meeting. But that isn’t the last word, because the subtler spiral of seduction describes not the history but the game of the missed encounter, and also that other pleasure it knows how to soak from this charming and absurd difference that nature has put between the sexes.

And so what was challenge and seduction ends in solicitude. Seduce me, love me, make me come, pay attention to me. Characteristic and obsessional trait, that can go all the way to an almost fetal demand for love (the fetal strategies).

There has been, for the last two or three centuries in our culture, an overdetermination of all forms of love (including love of nature) through maternal love and the sentimentality that derives

from it. Seduction alone escapes this, because it is not a demand but a challenge; it opposes this overdetermination the way the duel is opposed to fusion.

That kind of love (maternal) is no more than a floating libido that is vented just about everywhere and tries desperately to invest its environment, according to an economy that is no longer that of passionate systems but that of subsystems of intensity—cold and dispassionate. Ecological libido, a product specific to our epoch, spread out everywhere in homeopathic and homeostatic doses, is the minimal differential of affect that is enough to fuel social and psychological demand. Floating, it can be drained, diverted, magnetized from one niche to another, according to the flow. It corresponds ideally to an order of manipulation.

And so the energy of dissolution of seduction passes into the passionate order of love, and ends up in the aleatory order of demand.

Fortunately, there is a backfire, which corrects all that I've just said about demand. For by responding in the terms in which the situation is posed—in which it pretends to be posed—one runs the risk of misunderstanding. Perhaps it is simply soliciting—in its very hysteria—being denied, being refused, being disappointed, seeking the reply that that's not how things really happen. Just as any other discourse is proffered only in the hope of being denied and exorcized, so the demand can, actually, be only toying with the confession of desire, the call to solicitude of another, in order to set a trap for him, to lure and therefore seduce him.

The Object and Its Destiny

The Supremacy of the Object

“Only the subject desires; only the object seduces.”

We have always lived off the splendor of the subject and the poverty of the object. It is the subject that makes history, it's the subject that totalizes the world. Individual subject or collective subject, the subject of consciousness or of the unconscious, the ideal of all metaphysics is that of world subject; the object is only a detour on the royal road of subjectivity.

The fate of the object, to my knowledge, has been claimed by no one. It is not even intelligible as such: it is only the alienated, accursed part of the subject. The object is shamed, obscene, passive, prostituted, the incarnation of Evil, of pure alienation. A slave, its only glory would be to enter into a master-slave dialectic, where one can see the dawning of a new gospel, the promise of the object changing into a subject.

Who has ever sensed the foreboding of the particular and sovereign potency of the object? In our philosophy of desire, the subject retains an absolute privilege, since it is the subject that desires. But everything is inverted if one passes on to the thought of seduction. There, it's no longer the subject which desires, it's the object which seduces.

Everything comes from the object and everything returns to it, just as everything started with seduction, not with desire. The immemorial privilege of the subject is overthrown. For the subject is fragile and can only desire, whereas the object gets on very well even when desire is absent; the object seduces through the absence of desire; it plays on the other with the effect of desire, provoking or annulling it, exalting and deceiving it—precisely the power that we've wanted or preferred to forget.

Why privilege the position of the subject, why support this fiction of a will, a conscience, even of an unconscious for the subject? Because the subject has an economy and a history which is quite reassuring; it is the equilibrium between a will and a world, a drive and an object, the balancing principle of the universe, and again this is quite reassuring, for then it is not delivered up to the multiple, monstrous and fascinating universe, the cruel and aleatory universe of seduction come from out of the blue, nor is it the victim or the prey of all surrounding forms, living or dead, nor traversed by incessant seductions. We've really protected the subject: it will have been there from the beginning, with its drives, its desire, its will, in its fief, miraculously equipped to no longer be the object of anything at all.

Calling the subject into question hasn't changed much concerning the metaphysical postulate of its preeminence. Summoned to put into play, as a subject, its weakness, fragility, femininity and death, summoned to resign as a subject (not only the psychological subject, but also the subject of power and knowledge), the subject has only found itself trapped in the melodrama of its own disappearance—it has overdosed on resignation, it is convulsing on its foundations, looking for a gentleman's agreement with its object, the world, which it had felt strong enough to manipulate

to its own advantage. There results only a confusion, reflected today in all the vagaries of its "liberation." But the subject, the metaphysics of the subject, was beautiful only in its arrogant glory, in its caprice, in its inexhaustible will to power, in its transcendence as the subject of power, the subject of history, or in the dramaturgy of its alienation. Finished with all that, it is now only a miserable carcass in conflict with its own desire or its own image, incapable of managing a coherent representation of the world, pointlessly sacrificed on the corpse of history in an attempted resurrection.

The subject cannot play the card of its own fragility, nor of its own death, for the simple reason that it had been invented precisely as a safeguard against these things, as well as against the seductions—those of destiny, for instance—that carried the subject down to its ruin. Here there is an insoluble contradiction in the perspective of its own economy. And therefore, today, the position of the subject has become simply untenable. No one today can be assumed as the subject of power, knowledge, or history. And no one, furthermore, tries to. No one assumes this incommensurable role, which began to founder in ridicule with the world of bourgeois psychology, and today subjectivity finds itself simply erased into transparency and indifference. We are living through the convulsions of this subjectivity, and we haven't stopped inventing new ones—but this is no longer even diverting: the problematic of alienation has collapsed; the solidity of desire has become myth.

We arrive then at this paradox, at this conjuncture where the position of the subject has become untenable, and where the only possible position is that of the object. The only strategy possible is that of the object. We should understand, by this, not the "alienated" object in the process of de-alienation, the enslaved

object claiming its autonomy as a subject, but the object such as it challenges the subject, and pushes it back upon its own impossible position.

A strategy whose secret is: the object does not believe in its own desire; the object does not live off the illusion of its own desire; the object has no desire. It does not believe that anything belongs to it as property, and it entertains no fantasies of reappropriation or autonomy. It doesn't seek to ground itself in some nature proper to it, not even a nature of desire, but at the same time it knows no alterity and is inalienable. It is not divided with itself—which is the destiny of the subject—and it knows nothing of the mirror phase, where it would come to be caught by its own imaginary.

It *is* the mirror. It is that which returns the subject to its mortal transparency. So if it can fascinate or seduce the subject, it is because it radiates no substance or meaning of its own. The pure object is sovereign, because it is what breaks up the sovereignty of the other and catches it in its own trap. The crystal takes revenge.

The object is what has disappeared on the horizon of the subject, and it is from the depths of this disappearance that it envelopes the subject in its fatal strategy. It is the subject that then disappears from the horizon of the object.

This is true of the sexual object, powerful in its absence of desire; this is true of the masses, powerful in their silence.

Desire does not exist; the only desire is to be the destiny of the other, to become for him the event that exceeds all subjectivity, that checks, in its fatal advent, all possible subjectivity, that absolves the subject of its ends, its presence, and of all responsibility to itself and to the world, in a passion that is—finally, definitively—objective.

The possibility, the will of the subject to situate itself at the transcendental heart of the world and to think of itself as universal

causality, under the sign of a law of which it remains master, this will does not prevent the subject from invoking the object secretly, like a fetish, like a talisman, like a figure of the reversal of causality, like the locus of a violent hemorrhage of subjectivity. "Behind the subjectivity of appearances there is always an occulted objectivity."

The entire destiny of the subject passes into the object. For universal causality, irony substitutes the fatal power of a singular object.

The fetish illustrates the profound objection we entertain towards normal causality, towards the derisory pretention of assigning a cause to each event and each event to its cause.

Any effect is sublime if not reduced to its cause. Furthermore, only the effect is necessary; the cause is accidental.

The fetish performs this miracle of erasing the accidentality of the world and substituting for it an absolute necessity.

We sense in the apperception of causes only a relative necessity—and therefore a relative happiness. Only an absolute, ecstatic necessity can transport us. This is exactly what is realized by the pure and singular object, through which we at one stroke obtain the answer to all our worldly prayers.

We may live in the universal, pursue objective ends, distribute our life among the clear forms of alterity, accord things a more-or-less rational aspect (which can never equal the one we accord ourselves); nevertheless, at a given moment happiness and unhappiness, and the very fact of being alive at all, must be incarnated in an absolutely particular being or thing, which no longer corresponds to any universal determination, but where all the recapitulated forms of identity and otherness are precipitated in the form of a specific unjustifiable affect, completely artificial with respect to the "natural" qualities of this object.

No one escapes from this experience of investing an object, as an object, with all the occulted force of objectivity. This is also part of the absurd wagers we make, as was the case for Pascal's famous wager on the existence of God.

We need to believe that the wager we're making is somehow right, for if reason has it that a single object alone could not be at the origin of the world, but, on the contrary, should be explained objectively by all the worldly givens—if this reasoning cannot manage to sway our conviction; if, in spite of the rational evidence, we continue to adore the world in the unintelligible quintessence of a single one of its details, then this is because reason itself is a hypothetical wager.

No longer to explain things and to set their value in objective criteria and in an unbounded system of references, but, on the contrary, to implicate the whole world in a single one of its details, an entire event in a single one of its features, all the energy of nature in a single one of its objects, dead or alive—to find the esoteric ellipsis, the perfect shortcut toward the pure object, the one which is not involved in the division of meaning, and which shares its secret and power with no other.

The Absolute Commodity

The absolute object is one that is worthless, whose quality is a matter of indifference, but which escapes objective alienation in that it has made itself more of an object than the object—this gives it a fatal quality.

This escalation to the limit, this doubly revolutionary movement—responding to alienation in its own terms, following the

inexorable ways of indifference—is found prefigured in the absolute commodity, according to Baudelaire.⁵ Art (the work of art),

5. Giorgio Agamben, *Stances* (Paris: Christian Bourgois): “He (Baudelaire) approves the new character conferred on the object by its transformation into commodity; and he shows himself conscious of the attraction that this trait would fatally exert on the work of art... The greatness of Baudelaire, before the invasion of commodities, is to have answered to this invasion by transforming the work of art itself into commodity and fetish... In other words he’s brought the separation of exchange-value from use-value right up to the work of art itself ... whence Baudelaire’s implacable polemic against any utilitarian interpretation of art, his insistence on the intangible character of the aesthetic experience, and his theory of the beautiful as instantaneous and impenetrable epiphany. The aura of cold materiality which begins at that point to surround the work of art is equivalent to the character of fetish conferred upon commodities by exchange-value...

Baudelaire was not content only with reproducing in the work of art the scission between exchange-value and use-value. He proposed the creation of a commodity somehow absolute, in which the process of fetishization would be pushed to the point of annihilating the very reality of commodification as such; he conceived of commodities in which use-value and exchange-value would abolish each other mutually, whose value consists, therefore, in its inutility and whose use is its own intangibility, and which is no longer commodity: the transformation of the work of art into absolute commodity is therefore the most radical abolition of commodity. Here is where originates the casualness with which Baudelaire places the experience of ‘shock’ at the center of his artistic work. The ‘shock’ is the potential for strangeness that objects are charged with, when—in order to assume the enigmatic mask of commodity—they lose the authority conferred upon them by use-value... Baudelaire understood that to assure the survival of art in industrial civilization, the artist would have to seek the reproduction in his work of this destruction of use-value and traditional intelligibility.... The auto-negation of art became therefore its only possibility for survival.

It’s fortunate that the founder of modern poetry was a fetishist. Without his passion for feminine makeup and hairstyle, for jewelry and ornament, Baudelaire would have been painfully hard put to emerge victorious in his confrontation with commodities.”

confronted in modern times with the challenge of the commodity, does not, nor should it, look for its rescue in a critical denial (in which case it would only be its own derisory and impotent mirror, just as, by dint of critical denial, dialectical thought has become nothing but the powerless and derisory mirror of capital), but rather in outbidding the very formal and fetishized abstraction of commodities, under the enchantment of exchange-value—becoming more commodity than commodity, since even farther from all use-value.

If the commodity form breaks down the anterior ideality of the object (its beauty, its authenticity, even its functionality), then we shouldn't try to resuscitate it by denying the formal essence of commodities, we should, on the contrary—and here's the whole strategy of modernity, which constitutes for Baudelaire the entire perverse and adventurous seduction of the modern world—push to the absolute its division of value. No dialectic between the two; synthesis is a soft solution, dialectics a nostalgic one. The only radical and modern answer: potentiate what is new, original, unexpected in the commodity—for example, its formal indifference to utility and value, the preeminence given to circulation. That is what the work of art should be: it should adopt all the qualities of shock, strangeness, surprise, disquietude, liquidity, even autodestruction, the instantaneity and unreality which belong to the commodity.

The inhumanity of exchange-value is to be exponentially multiplied in a kind of ecstatic but ironic orgasm over the indifferent ways of alienation. This is why, in the enchanted, ironic (and non-dialectical) logic of Baudelaire, the work of art becomes one with fashion, advertising, the "fairy land of the code"—a work of art that bewilders in its venality, mobility, effects of missing referent, chance, vertigo—a pure object of marvellous commutability, since, the causes having disappeared, all effects are virtually equivalent.

These effects can amount to nothing also, as we well know, but it's the business of the work of art to make a fetish of this nullity, this disappearance, and to draw from it extraordinary consequences. A new form of seduction: no longer a matter of the mastery of conventional effects, the mastery of illusion and of the aesthetic order, but rather of the vertigo of obscenity—but who can tell the difference? A vulgar commodity can generate only a universe of production—and God knows that this universe is a sad one! Raised to the power of absolute commodity, it produces effects of seduction.

The work of art—a new and triumphant fetish and not a sad alienated one—should work to deconstruct its own traditional aura, its authority and power of illusion, in order to shine resplendent in the pure obscenity of the commodity. It must annihilate itself as familiar object and become monstrously foreign. But this foreignness is not the disquieting strangeness of the repressed or alienated object; this object does not shine from its being haunted, or out of some secret dispossession; it glows with a veritable seduction that comes from elsewhere, from having exceeded its own form and become pure object, pure event.

This perspective, whose source for Baudelaire is the spectacle of the transfiguration of the commodity in the Universal Exposition of 1855, is superior in many ways to that of Walter Benjamin. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin derives from the object's loss of aura and authenticity, in the age of reproduction, a desperately political determination (that is to say, politically desperate), opening on melancholy modernity—while the idea of Baudelaire, infinitely more modern (but could one possibly be modern in the nineteenth century?), embraces the exploration of new forms of seduction linked to pure objects and events, to that modern passion which is fascination.

In this, Baudelaire was better at resisting the depressing theory of alienation (which has had only damaging effects on the slack thought of the twentieth century); he better grasped—possibly because of the historical novelty of the eruption of commodities—what would be the only real response, aesthetic and metaphysical, ironical and joyous, to the challenge. And we shouldn't be fooled by Baudelaire's "aesthetic preoccupations." His idea of an absolute commodity is tantamount to a radical perspective in every domain.⁶

In Praise of the Sexual Object

Only the object is seductive.

The vulgar seducer has understood nothing at all. He thinks of himself as subject, of the other as victim of his strategy. A naive psychology, as much as that of the "beautiful souls" who take the role

6. This said, Marx also began with the idea of the commodity as an inescapable little fact and supreme foreignness of the modern world. He begins with the inexplicable, not really in order to explain it but to change it into an enigma, upon which all his dogma founders. Hieroglyphics. Marx had allowed something enigmatic and enchanting to float above the commodity, its anxiously foreign quality, its challenge to the meaningful arrangement of things, to the real, morality, utility, to all values including the very idea of value itself.

It is this ambiguous fascination that we find in all the phenomena of capital, in the enchantment of this universal code, at least in its original aspects. Marxist dogma has crushed all that (Marx contributed to this himself). The entire enigma of capital, of the commodity, has been massacred by revolutionary morality; but where is—where could there be—a revolutionary immorality?

of victim: neither realizes that all initiative and power are on the other side, the side of the object.

Furthermore, the vulgarity of this analysis of seduction recurs in the analysts themselves; the seducer himself is not so stupid (neither is the victim), and he knows implicitly that if seduction amounted to nothing more than this pitiful psychology, it would never work. Is it not rather the seducer who is seduced, and does the initiative not revert secretly to the object? The seducer believes he envelopes it in his strategy, but he is caught by the lure of this banal strategy and it is rather the object that envelopes him in its fatal strategy.

What charms us is that which takes the shape of a predestined object. This is what raises the ante on pure objectness, as Sartre would say, so that you are delivered from it in your turn—just as the absolute commodity liberates you more radically from commodities.

Sartre: “In seduction I am not at all trying to expose my subjectivity to the other. To seduce is to assume entirely, and as a risk to be run, my objectness for the other; it is to put myself before his gaze and to be looked at by him; it is to run the risk of being seen to appropriate the other in and by my objectness. I refuse to leave the terrain of my object-ness: it is on this ground that I wish to engage the struggle by making myself into a fascinating object...”

Only that which no longer poses the problem of its own desire (the hysteric, for example, who couldn't care less about it), is seductive, only that which has passed through the absolution and resolution of its own desire.

And so the cruel story of the woman to whom a man has written a passionate letter and who asks in her turn: “What part of me

seduced you the most?" To which he replies, "Your eyes," and receives by return mail, wrapped in a package, the eye which seduced him.

The beauty and violence of this defiance against the platitude of the seducer. But also the diabolism of this woman, who takes revenge against the very wish to be seduced: trap for trap, eye for eye. Never did punishment take so awful a form as in this unscrupulous offering. She loses an eye, but he loses face—how will he be able from now on to "cast an eye" on a single woman without being afraid of getting one in return? For really nothing is worse than to utter a wish and to have it literally fulfilled; nothing is worse than to be rewarded on the exact level of one's demand. He is caught in the trap by the object that surrenders to him as a literal object.

This is the portion of fatal provocation which is in each object, always ready to renew the cruel game of seduction. The man cannot but respond to the woman's engaging question: "What part of me do you find most attractive?" and commits thereby an irreparable mistake. The vengeful logic of the object is there first of all. (We might wonder what would have happened if he had replied: your voice, your mouth, your sex, your soul, your look, whatever—but this question is no doubt meaningless, for in the courtly context the only possible reply is the eyes as metaphor for the soul.)

This is, in fact, exactly the metaphor that the woman chooses to repudiate, which privileges her absolutely. He, as subject, can play only the game of the metaphor. She, abjuring all metaphor, becomes the fatal object which drags the subject down to annihilation.

For this to happen a confusion of sign and body suffices, a shortcut basically like Harpo Marx showing a real swordfish instead and in place of the password "swordfish." Here the witticism is

crueler, but it denies the password “your eyes” in the same way, and along with it the entire idealized rhetoric of seduction. For he only speaks to her of her eyes and her look as if he were talking about her: she is free to respond to this by the gift of herself, but not of her eye as object pure and simple. This cruel realist short circuit isn’t far removed from what can be translated elsewhere as the cannibalistic consumption of the loved object—here it’s the extraversion of the self as pure object that operates as pitiless gratification. The object strategy, that of the woman, consists in interdicting the metaphorical displacement of discourse, from the eye to the look and from the look to being, the only way the subject can exist and allow itself to be seduced.

This liquidation of metaphor, this precipitation of the sign into brute, senseless matter, is a thing of murderous efficacy. It is of the same order as the meaningless event, the catastrophe, which is also a blind reply, without metaphor, of the world as object to man as subject. It’s always like this that destiny becomes specific: at a given moment, at a given point, signs become objects, impossible to turn into metaphors, cruel, without appeal. They cut short any decipherment, become confused with things (which is why fate is a dreamer, with the unintelligible instantaneity signs and words have in dreams).

The strategy of the object, like that of the woman in the story, is to be confused with the thing desired. All the irony and cruelty lies in this excessively objective form of answer: it leaves the subject without recourse.

This is also a beautiful example of the woman’s ability to play in two registers: that of directly sexual supply and demand (she can reply without condition to the demand, like the woman with her eye, and the man finds himself naked and obscene in his own eyes, naked and humiliated in his enjoyment of the object)—or else that

of the game, the lure, the metaphor, deferred sexuality. The man has no such possibility. The woman remains free to choose the terrain. The man is continually exposed to loss of face: if he risks sexual advances, he always runs the danger of refusal; if he engages in a subtler game, he falls prey to a subtler form of rejection. The inverse is not true. The woman is not in the position of desire; she's in the much higher position of object of desire.

Naturally she loses this prerogative when she turns away from the indifference of the object to desire. She then becomes as vulnerable as any subject, and she will, as such, come to know all the forms of this useless suffering.

The transfer of sexual initiative to the woman has created a new situation. For the masculine prerogative, from the time of the "woman as object," at least gave rise to a whole culture of passion and seduction, to a novelistic culture linked to the game of sexual interdiction. Such a culture is scarcely possible in the opposite direction. One doesn't see the man assuming the modesty and secrecy, provocations and withdrawal, the whole sublime and subliminal strategy of the object which made for the eternal feminine. There is no eternal masculine because there is no interdiction which protects the man from the sexual demand of the woman. The woman who wants a man has no need to seduce. The man, if the woman so wishes, will still have to seduce her.

And if the constraint of object femininity has ceased for the woman, on the other hand the constraint of virility has not ceased for the man. He finds himself called upon to respond, to keep from losing face, to the sexual demand of the woman—a situation in which the latter has never found herself, for she has always had the possibility of eluding it, in seduction and refusal in particular, where she did not risk losing face (quite the contrary).

This is perhaps the meaning of Fellini's film (*The City of Women*): man is defenseless, naked and uncertain before the monsters of deployed femininity, erratic fantasies of all possible femininity without the shadow of a hint of seduction.

The situation is therefore no longer dual but unilateral. The object woman was sovereign and remained mistress of seduction (by a secret rule of the game of desire). The object man is only a subject stripped naked, an orphan of desire, dreaming of a lost mastery—neither a subject nor truly an object of desire, but only the mythical instrument of a cruel liberty.

One can say of any object, in its immobility and aphasia, what Canetti says about animals: "If you look attentively at an animal, you get the feeling that a man is hidden inside and is making fun of you."

We could say of women that someone else is hidden inside and is mocking us. Women are so skilled, they seem to be so submissive, they know so well, too well, how to be unhappy—there must be something there that is hiding and lying in wait. That same objective irony that lies in wait for all subjectivity with every chance of conquering it.

Something in the woman ignores possession. Something in the object ignores possession. Possession is the preoccupation and pride of the subject, but not of the object, which is totally indifferent to it, as to its liberation. The object wants only to seduce—that is how it plays its servitude, just as animals do their silence, the stones their indifference, and women their look—the object always wins.

So why pride oneself on difference, when indifference is sure to prevail? Why avail oneself of meaning when silence is sure to win?

The power of the object lies in its irony. Difference is always serious, but indifference is ironic.

Thus the woman can demand to be recognized as a subject in her own right (besides, this is a new style of seduction, and the game of the emancipation of subjects is not without charm when it leads to objective delights on both sides), and the man willingly allows himself to be caught in this trap, for he too likes to consent to some sacrifice. But if he lets himself be trapped, he is lost, lost by looking ridiculous in the eyes of the woman which watch him from the depths of her objective irony (from that occult irony that belies any pretention of liberation), just as he would be lost by looking ridiculous in the eyes of an animal he would like to recognize as a subject in its own right. That is where the trap is set; that is where it closes.

No one can regard as anything but ridiculous the pretension of recognizing anyone as "a subject in its own right." And therefore, when the woman pretends to this ("I don't want to be seduced; I want to be recognized"), it is a trap into which the man easily falls, because it is pleasant to be regarded as a source of recognition. Actually, this demand is ironic, but he doesn't know it.

What this woman wants, what we all want as objects (and we are objects as much as subjects, and doubtless in a more original way—not passive objects, but passionate objects, with drives that come from the depths of their object-being) is not to be hallucinated and exalted as a subject in her own right, but rather to be taken profoundly as object, just as she is, with her senseless, immoral, supersensual character—object, that is to say, delivered over to everything and everyone, prey and universal predator, maybe even possessed, prostituted, enslaved, manipulated and

marked as such, but also, from the depths of all that, perfectly seductive and inalienable. Once we recognize this fundamental character (this liberty) of the sexual object, the woman is ready for all the games of love and psychology; but it is as a pure object, not as a subject, that she'll seduce you, that you'll seduce her. She can be dominated, exploited, seduced—but not through alienation, submission, or masochism (the mistake is always to bring the object down to the level of the defective and perverse psychology of the subject). What makes for her power is, on the contrary, her triumphal indifference, her triumphal lack of subjectivity. She remains mistress of the game; the object remains master of the game and only reinforces its ironic sovereignty.

You insult her by being too attentive to games of modesty and wit, just as you insult a child by being too sensitive to its age or strength. The child, deep down, knows he is not a child. And he is not concerned with the affectation of liberty and responsibility with which you wish to dignify him in order better to dignify the pedagogical difference between adult and child. He competes rather on equal terms. He is neither free nor inferior, and leaves it to others to believe that. He envelopes you with his shamelessness, for which precisely all means are justified. He can choose to play up difference, to play the fragile child facing the adult; and you then owe it to him to protect him, to valorize him, to attenuate the difference. Or else at any moment he can choose to return you to the absence of difference, real and fundamental (childhood doesn't exist; there is no child). He would be right in both cases. This confers upon him an absolute superiority.

In the same way the woman can always choose to abandon herself as a sexual object and to give herself without scruples (which always profoundly surprises the man), or to play at being

recognized as a subject, at letting herself be seduced, but refusing indefinitely, and so on. She can always abandon one role for another, without, for all that, becoming hysterical or capricious or whatnot: this is not psychology, it is strategy—which here also confers upon her an absolute superiority over the man.

Everyone gets off in his or her own way. The very possibility of sexuality rests on the fact that each of us is ignorant of how the other comes (or even if). This is a vital misunderstanding, one could say. It's the biological form of the secret. There exist other mysterious manifestations, but this one, this enigma, shines resplendently in the firmament of sexuality: the *jouissance* of the other escapes us. Therefore, there is no possession, for we wouldn't possess the other unless we felt their orgasm.

Fortunately it is so, for this is how the woman can eternally seduce us, by means of this hidden *jouissance*, which thus becomes an incalculable pleasure.

The wonderful story of Tiresias! Between two copulating snakes, he was able to tell the male from the female. He would be a man, then a woman. And he would say afterwards that the woman has nine times the pleasure of the man. For this indiscretion he was to be blinded by Hera, and would receive the gift of clairvoyance.

Must we betray the secret of the climax? To whom is it granted to pass from one sex to the other, not by surgical operation, but by a metamorphosis of the orgasm? And who could still be able to talk about it?

Happily there exists this absolute singularity, the mythical orgasm of the other, to found sexual difference. That is why it is an enigma, and it is for having resolved this enigma, for having passed on the other side of sex, that Tiresias, like Oedipus, will be

condemned to blindness—he could also have been transformed into a hermaphroditic tree. Not for having betrayed the secret (?) of the feminine orgasm, for the latter does not exist: the multiplication by nine of feminine *jouissance* is only the ironic multiplication of the man's desire. It bears witness to the fact that the woman is only the ironic ecstasy of the man's desire.

Who would worry about that? The only worrisome thing is what distances us from this enigmatic difference and pulls us toward the sharing of the pleasure, therefore towards indifference. Therein lies the whole misunderstanding about sexual liberation.

But in the end the greatest singularity is to be found not on the side of orgasm, but in this more extraordinary rapport of seduction. It alone leads to this strange situation: making of the opposite sex a destiny, making of it not a final object (of orgasm) but a fatal object (of death and metamorphosis). Because seduction plays on a register incomparable to anatomical (or psychological) difference. Because it pushes the game of difference to the point of challenge and absolute attraction, to a vertigo where it is no longer a question of who comes nine times more than the other because it is a vertigo from raising the stakes and not from accounting. Because here the bets are placed according to a higher set of rules, which may not have any ends, and certainly no computation of pleasures (a computation is forced to stop somewhere). Seduction alone can put an end to the domination of one sex over the other.

The dream in love would be to become a woman. The profound fantasy of physical and mental love is one not of possession but of metamorphosis, of sexual transfiguration. At the high point in lovemaking we're haunted by the enigma of the opposite sex. All copulation aims only at that: to touch upon the other sex as

upon adversity, to integrate it by divination. An insoluble dream that exhausts itself in the possession of all women, continuously.

But how is it for women? Apparently they do not dream of being men. They do not have this weakness. They are not consumed by curiosity about the other sex, rather they faint rather into their own, by effusion or hysteria, in a rapport with the body which implies no mystery for themselves, but a meticulous affection and attention. Makeup, narcissism, seduction, attraction, hysteria: sacred forms of concupiscence, transitory and hallowed forms of concupiscence that the woman constitutes at every moment for herself. By all the care that she takes, she metamorphoses constantly into herself. What remains for the man but to seek through her this power of metamorphosis?

He is himself bound to sexual difference. All the drama of difference is on the side of the man; all the charm of difference is on the side of the woman. No misery, no oppression of the woman will ever depreciate this supremely unequal destiny, that will always swing the balance of dream, obsession, enigma, and strategem to the side of the sex that prefers itself and thus delineates that deliciously empty hollow—that of pleasure—where the other comes to lose himself.

What Tiresias's story tells us is that what we dream of most profoundly is not sex but the reversibility of the sexes, the ability to see sex from both sides, just as the clairvoyant or prophet (Tiresias) is able to see the two sides of time. We dream of a state of clairvoyance which is that of the mastery and reversibility of time, just as we dream of a state of sexual pleasure that would be a state of mastery over the reversibility of sex.

The supreme orgasm is metamorphosis.

The Gray Imminence

A strange pride obliges us not only to possess the other, but also to force out his secret, not only to be precious to him, but to be fatal. The voluptuousness of the gray imminence: the art of making the other disappear. A whole ceremony is required for this.

First follow people you meet in the street, at random, for an hour, two hours, brief sequences, disorganized—with the idea that people's lives are arbitrary trajectories, directionless, going nowhere, and that for this very reason they are fascinating. The network of the other is used as a means of absenting yourself from yourself. You exist only in the other's trace, but without his knowledge; in fact you follow your own trace almost without knowing it yourself. It is therefore not in order to discover something about the other, nor about where he's going, nor a "drift" in quest of some random aleatory course: all this, which corresponds to various contemporary ideologies, isn't particularly seductive, whereas this enterprise itself depends entirely upon seduction.

You seduce yourself into being no more than the mirror of the other, who doesn't know it—just like Kierkegaard's mirror suspended on the opposite wall: the young lady doesn't think about it, but the mirror does. You seduce yourself into being the destiny of the other, the double of his course, which for him has meaning, but which, duplicated, no longer has any. It's as if someone, behind him, knew that he was going nowhere. This is somehow stealing his objective from him: an evil genie comes and slips subtly between him and it. This is so magnetic that people often sense they are being followed, through a sort of intuition that something has entered their space and has altered its curve.

One day S. decides to add another dimension to this "experience." She learns that a man whom she barely knows, from having followed him once by chance, is taking a trip to Venice. She decides to follow him all through his voyage. Once in Venice, she explores a hundred hotels, and finally locates the one where he's staying. She rents a room with a window opposite so as to be able to follow his comings and goings. She has binoculars and a camera, and she photographs him on each occasion, the places he has gone, the objects he has touched. She expects nothing from him. She doesn't want to know him. She is not particularly attracted to him. It's Carnival time in Venice. Since he might be able to recognize her (they once talked), she becomes a blond (she has been a brunette). She puts on makeup and disguises herself. But the pleasures of Carnival do not interest her; everything is a function of shadowing him. She spends two whole weeks, at the price of incalculable effort, in keeping on his trail. She manages to find out about his plans, by questioning people in the shops where he goes, and about what seats he has reserved for the theatre. Even the time of his return train to Paris, where, having taken the preceding train, she will be waiting for him when he gets off, in order to take a last picture of him.

No, not the last. She doesn't abandon the trail, and contacts people who work with him, a writer with whom he's going to collaborate as a photographer. But things turn out badly. Two or three times he has noticed her following him; there was an incident in Venice. In Paris it's even more serious; he becomes violent. The charm is lost and she gives up.

Deep down, did she want him to kill her or, finding the shadowing intolerable (especially since she has expected nothing, much less a sexual adventure), did she want him to throw himself upon her to do her violence? Or that turning on her, like Orpheus leading

Eurydice back from Hell, he might make her suddenly disappear? Did she simply want to be his destiny, or want him to become hers? Like all games, this one had its fundamental rule: nothing was to happen that might have created a contact or a relation between them. That was the price of the seduction. The secret must not be lifted, under penalty of falling into *cliché*.

Of course there is something murderous about this for someone who is being followed. He can take umbrage over it, feel persecuted, become paranoid. But that was not S's goal (even if this fantasy could be aroused sometimes during the course of the days and hours; but she also takes a risk: the other could reverse the situation, having sensed the strategem, go after her, obliging her to accept his terms—he is no victim, he is as strong as she is). No, the murder is subtler: it consists, as you follow someone step by step, of erasing his trace as you go. Now no one can live without leaving a trace. This is what makes anyone who is being followed turn around after a certain time. Even without clues, how could he not have a presentiment of the spell that surrounds him? The gray, or blonde, eminence that is following him leaves no trace, but she steals his trace from him. She photographs him incessantly. Photography here has no perverse or archival function. It simply says: here, at such an hour, at such a place, under such a light there was someone. And it says simultaneously: it made no sense to be here, at such a place and moment—in fact, there was no one—and I, who followed him, can guarantee no one was there. These are not the snapshot memories of a presence, but shots of an absence—that of the person followed, of the follower, and even of their absence from each other.

“Follow me instead,” said another to whom she had spoken of her shadowing, “I’m more interesting to follow than the housewife

next door.” But this is a misinterpretation, and confuses interest with a higher degree of seduction. It is uninteresting to find out that someone is leading a double life, for example, except for the little flavor of strangeness it might lend them. The important thing is that it is being followed itself that is the double life of the other. Anyone’s banal existence can be transformed, but anyone’s exceptional life can be made banal by this act. Once again, it’s not a matter of persecution, but of seduction.

The Duke of Palagonia also understood how to warp the fatal shadow of deforming mirrors. This noble Spaniard, deformed and monstrous, built in the vicinity of Palermo a villa in his own image, peopled with gnomes, surrounded with convex mirrors, so that the most beautiful girl in Sicily, whom he had married, should think of herself as ugly, and therefore be resigned to love him who resembled her.

Or does he assure power for himself by inventing a world of lubricious forms (ugliness is lewd), where beauty would be caught out of defiance, out of weakness, because its perfection is intolerable?

That is probably the secret of all seduction: it offers beauty a deforming mirror where it is finally liberated from its perfection. More generally, it offers the other a strange mirror where it is finally liberated from its being, its liberty, its image, its resemblance—all things that in the secrecy of the self weigh heavily upon one. God himself is seduced by the devil.

Is there a secret of the Villa Palagonia? No, beauty wants something worse than itself, it wants to be sequestered, raped, tortured (the Christ in the chapel himself floats hanging by the shoulders, suspended from the vault like a stuffed bird). The first one who presents himself will seduce her by monstrosity.

But not the first to come along. The Duke of Palagonia had a lofty soul.

The young and beautiful A. is courted by a prince, who, not being able to see her, writes her every day. She knows nothing of this, for these letters come to her mother, who responds faithfully for her and so maintains an amorous conpondance with the prince. A. will find out the truth, along with all the letters and answers, later, after the mother's death, among her papers. *And she will not hate her for this.* This betrayal, on the contrary, absolutely dazzles her posthumously.

A. possesses only the spontaneous charm of seduction, and there is no mystery in the prince's attraction to her. But the fatal power, the one which holds the secret, the symbolic power (aesthetic, Kierkegaard would say) of seduction, the true seducer, is the mother.

She is the one who reflects, intercepts and distills the seduction of her daughter *without her knowledge*. This ignorance is essential; it is the fundamental rule. Only the other knows that you are a queen; only the other knows that you are loved, that you are going nowhere, that your life is senseless. He somehow shadows you, sneaks your *raison d'être*, and thus obliges you to exist, through this subversion, more intensely than if he engendered you.

This story is beautiful for the incestuous shadow it projects, but we need to rid it of all Oedipal foolishness about incest. Seducing what one has engendered is, in its banal version, crime *par excellence*. But in a deeper order of things, incest is natural and required. One must seduce what one has produced and engendered. On the contrary, it is perhaps the fact of being engendered and engendering that is the crime above all others, and that which must be resolved, redeemed, expiated by the initiatory fact of

seducing and being seduced. And this seduction is always more or less incestuous because, like incest, it is an esoteric form: it consists in having you enter into the secret, and not only into life; it consists in giving you a destiny, and not only an existence.

It is thus that the mother redeems, in a way, this secret intervention, the fact of having brought her daughter into the world. That is why the story of the secret destiny that the mother had given her is so beautiful, like another life she might have given in addition to the first.

Incest does not proceed from some desire, from the interdiction of desire; it does not proceed from a natural or antinatural instinct; there is nothing libidinal about it. But neither can it be the basis for the law or the symbolic order. It expresses the fundamental rule that *all that has been produced must be seduced* (initiated into disappearance after having been initiated into existence). It is for this that we exert ourselves in every possible way. We are called upon at every moment to seduce (that is, to lure to immolate and to destroy, to subvert and to *ravish*) that which the law summons us to produce. The law imposes production upon us, but the secret rule, never spoken, hidden behind the law, imposes seduction upon us, and that rule is stronger than the law.

Destiny is profiled only in this enigmatic conjuncture: my secret is elsewhere. No one holds the key to his own secret—this is the error of all psychology, including that of the unconscious. All that is linked outside of myself (in dream or language as well as in event or catastrophe), all of this constitutes for me a fatal object—even if it doesn't bring on death, it implies a dispossession of the subject, draws him into the secret, beyond his own end, in spite of himself, outside of himself, there also in a kind of ecstasy.

This is the enigma: how can one be in on the secret without knowing it? The enigmatic resolution is this: only the other knows, God alone knows, destiny alone knows. The secret is what envelopes you without your knowing it.

So in A.'s story. A. is in on the secret, she has a secret destiny, but she doesn't know it. There is no risk of her betraying it: only her mother knows.

In certain cases it is only language that knows. It is in language alone that the ironic and fatal chain is linked.

As in Alphonse Allais's story, *Only in Paris*. Two young people, two young lovers, each receive an anonymous letter, denouncing to each of them the infidelity of the other. If the woman wants proof she has only to go to a certain masked ball; her lover will be there, disguised as Harlequin. The other receives the same secret advice. Go to this certain ball, your wife will be there, disguised as a Congolese boatman. On the evening in question, in the middle of the ball, two people sit, off to the side. Finally, he advances towards her and invites her to go off with him, to a private little room where they throw themselves upon each other to tear off the masks. And, as the story tells it, to their stupefaction, *it was neither one nor the other!*

All the illogical charm of the story is in the movement where the two rush to raise their masks and there's nothing behind them. As if the two masks (Harlequin and Boatman) were acting on their own, looking to remarry each other, as a function of a pure inertia of language, of the tale, while they have no reason for doing so. (But by what miracle do they find themselves there, by what uncanny conjuncture, and where are the two others, the real ones, during this time?) The real is *out*; only the appearances function, and they combine according to their own logic, where logic should

have forever separated them: such is the game of pure appearance. This is exactly the function of wit. For precisely in the *Witz*,* the word becomes a line—no longer a carrier sign but a pure vector of appearance. *Fragments of language unknown to each other, without causal links, meet there as if by enchantment and discover with delight that they were “neither one nor the other.”* The terms tear off each other’s masks, but do not recognize each other.

Of course all of this is connected to language’s possibility of continuing on the thrust of the real (to make it seem like something is there to be represented) and then to collide with pure appearance, that is to say, to continue to function beyond its end. Which allows Allais to slip in this little phrase: “...and it was neither one nor the other”—which is made possible as a logical utterance by the very functioning, mad and fantastic, of language alone—unintelligible to reason. Now all the vertigo resides in this little phrase. The story could easily be told without it: the two lovers recognize each other and fall into each other’s arms, reconciled—that supplies a spicy and edifying story, in the style of the sentimental eighteenth century (in the image of Sade’s novella, where a transvestite seduces a woman he believes to be a transvestite—but both are homosexuals. Disappointment at the moment of the respective discovery of their sexes, but with sex you always wind up managing somehow). You might also suppose that one of the two would really be himself, and the other would not be the other: that would be a gallant tale. *But it wouldn’t be a seductive one.*

With Allais the strongest part lies in the conclusion, when he says that “since this episode, they have never again had any married couples’ spats”—letting it be understood that this pure effect of fiction and unreality had some consequences on the level of the real, letting hover just the shadow of the dizzying hypothesis

that “all the same it was really them” (otherwise there could be no consequences).

Furthermore who could know “it was neither one nor the other,” since no one was there to recognize it? They (the two real characters) do not even know that they are not there, but *language itself knows it, and it alone knows it*. Exactly like in Kierkegaard’s mirror: “A mirror is hanging on the wall opposite her—she doesn’t think about this at all, but the mirror thinks about it.”

In order for there to be seduction, signs or words must thus function without knowing it, as in the *Witz**. Things must be absent from themselves, and words must be meaningless. But the characters cannot know even this (only language knows)—as in the case of S., where the one who shadows is alone in knowing that the other is going nowhere, or inversely, as in *Death at Samarkand*, where he who thinks he’s escaping, no matter where, is mistaken, because the other, Death, knows where he’s going and waits for him there.

In this sense, by an unexpected detour, it could be that Allais’ conclusion isn’t so absurd as it seems (that the two young lovers would never again have those “married couples’ spats”!). We must admit into the order of events what we can easily verify in the order of language: when two words, two signs, seduce each other, even without their knowing it, in the unfolding of language (*Witz**), this seduction, as unique as it is, has dazzling effects on the entire sentence and on the whole effect of communication. Nothing prevents, therefore, the seductive conjunction of just the masks alone, in this unintelligible episode, from having on the real lovers some positive consequence. Somehow, they found and seduced each other again. Somehow, whatever happens on the level of the pure appearance of the tale always impinges on the real. We can ask no more of language. Once magic asked this of it—and got it.

It's not enough for a story to be illogical and meaningless to be seductive; it is still necessary that this be *signaled* in an unintelligible way. And so Allais's story isn't soluble in logical terms, but not any more so in terms of chance or probability, either (there is no chance that such an event could occur by chance). Nothing can be articulated in it; there is no solution, but this ironic and unexpected linkage of language is itself necessary. Which makes the irresolution stunning, instead of being banal, since it is the operation of a pure sign. There lies the prestige of illusion.

This is also the way those little phrases operate that come to us from somewhere else. According to Canetti:

"We never forget these phrases. They probably take from us an innocence that could be very pleasant to keep. But through these cruel breaks a man is initiated into his own nature. Without them he could never really see himself. They must intervene by surprise, must come from the outside. Any phrase that comes to us from elsewhere is efficacious because it is unexpected: we have nothing to counterbalance it with. We help it with an energy identical to that with which we would have opposed it in other circumstances."

These little phrases are the opposite of those banal ones where we recognize ourselves, of those phrases that make us ashamed, where suddenly the subject becomes ashamed of what he is. Instead of which these little fatal phrases are like the eruption of a pure unidentified object that renders the subject unidentifiable to himself. Nothing in the subject can counterbalance the efficacy of these phrases, since they no longer serve as mirror and he can no longer exercise, as he can on others, his flattery on them. Suddenly all the energy with which he ordinarily would have opposed them finds itself transferred and thrown back upon them. The irruption of the pure object inverts all rapports: the object becomes powerful with

all the power of the subject. All our energy is ravished from us, instantaneously diverted by this object come from elsewhere. We accept it willingly; we are ourselves ravished by this “cruel break” in the order of things, by this unexpected revolution, by this turn-about of energy and the inversion of the poles of power.

The Crystal Revenge

Psychoanalysis has privileged one aspect of our lives and hidden another. It has overestimated one of our births—the biological and genital one—and has forgotten the other—the initiatic birth. It has forgotten that if two beings are there presiding at our biological birth, it always happens that others seduce you (they may even be the same ones), and these others are in a sense our initiatic parents. This second birth redeems the first one, along with all the Oedipal conflicts so well described by psychoanalysis, but which really concern only the first birth.

This first birth imposes a history upon us, necessarily an Oedipal one. A history of repression and unconscious work, a psychological history of complexes and mourning, of the always altered and mortifying rapports with the Father, the Law, and the Symbolic Order. What psychoanalysis has not seen is that what happens to us is always fortunately something else, an event without precedent that inaugurates not a history but a destiny, and which, because it is without precedent, liberates us from this genesis and this history. This event *without precedent* is seduction; it is also without origin, coming from somewhere else and arriving always unexpectedly—a pure event that erases in one fell swoop all conscious and unconscious determination.

We were all once produced, we must all be seduced. That is the only true “liberation,” that which opens beyond the Oedipus complex and the Law, and which delivers us from a stern psychological calvary as well as from the biological fatality of having been sexually engendered.

The only invalids are those sick from seduction. Precisely the ones to whom this event without precedent did not happen, those that have never known this second, initiatory birth and who, for this reason, remain strapped in their Oedipal history and destined for psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis takes them on the basis of an economy of desire, that is to say, of a refusal of seduction, within whose walls psychoanalysis has helped not a little to enclose them.

For it is from psychoanalysis (though not only from it, of course) that this inconceivable hallucination of the individual about his own desire proceeds. As Monique Schneider has shown in her book, *Freud and Pleasure*, it is psychoanalysis which, at the end of the “psychological revolution” of the nineteenth century, succeeded in this mad substitution of an individual psychic economy, of a libido, of one’s own desire, and the Oedipal reversals of this desire at the event come from elsewhere, for the initiatory, seductive, and fatal incidence of the other as an event without precedent, for the surprise, for the coincidence of the world and the signs that make you not a subject but a preferred object of election and seduction.

What makes you exist is not the force of your desire (wholly a nineteenth-century imaginary of energy and economy), but the play of the world and seduction; it is the passion of playing and being played, it is the passion of illusion and appearance, it is that which comes from elsewhere, from others, from their face, their language, their gestures—and that which bothers you, lures you,

summons you into existence; it is the encounter, the surprise of what exists before you, outside of you, *without you*—the marvelous exteriority of the pure object, of the pure event, of what happens without your having anything to do with it. What a relief—this alone is enough to seduce you; we've been so solicited to be the cause of everything, to find a cause for everything. Mineral object, solstice event, sensual object, desert form—all these are seductive because they have nothing to do with our economy of desire and because, basically, being doesn't give a damn about its own being; it is nothing, and exists only when it is lifted out of itself, into the play of the world and the vertigo of seduction.

It's against all this that psychoanalysis takes a stand when it forms the hypothesis of an exterior world as aggression, of the ego as a system of defense and investment, of pleasure as resolution of tensions. The whole problem for Freud was how to destroy the wild event of seduction.

It is a paradoxical situation for analysis when it refers to dream material, for precisely in this fatal perspective the dream is event, while in analysis it is no more than a symptom. The same is true for madness, neurosis, and the parapraxis: everywhere psychoanalysis has missed their irruptive, illusive, seductive power, bypassed them as facts and made of them mere symptoms, stripping all sovereignty from the irruption of things, from the magic of appearances, and from the challenge they imply, pushed them back to the particular subject of interpretation. Against all of this psychoanalysis has hoisted its desiring subject, its Robinson Crusoe of the unconscious, sworn to an insular economy and to the exorcism of all external aggression. Even the very conception of the outside world as a source of disequilibrium and of the internal drive itself as a threat of rupture is symptomatic: the only destiny of the subject

should be to discharge its tensions, to purge itself of its internal excitations, to neutralize the irruption of demonic forces that continually threaten the psychological fortress with disintegration. It's no longer even a destiny of drives, but a destiny of expulsion. Like Ulysses, closed off from any incantation by outside forms, the subject's only task will be to liberate itself from its instinctual energy, in a defensive organization sworn to pleasure as a principle (!) and to death as resolution—even to the death drive itself as a way to get rid of these tensions.

Monique Schneider shows how Freud the theorist recants before the first assaults of seduction (of the concept of seduction), glimpsed for a moment by organizing the psychic apparatus of psychoanalysis, itself centered on a whole individual protected from the very beginning—a pure instinctual enclosure destined to administer its own desire, to distribute its investments, to invent its object relations, to fantasize about its image—that is, a being for whom everything will basically happen from the inside, in an essentially individual process, and nothing from the outside, in a dual process.

For Oedipus to return to Thebes and to the Oedipal problematic (sleeping with his mother, going blind as symbolic castration, etc.), the Sphinx has to be dead, which means an end has to be put to seduction and its vertigo, to the enigma and secret, in favor of a hidden history whose drama lies entirely in repression and whose key is in interpretation (while the enigma is never to be revealed, it seduces by way of a secret intelligibility which is on the order of divination); an end must be put to the seductive enigma, in favor of deadly truth.

Similarly, for Freud to enter upon the royal and Oedipal road of psychoanalytic interpretation, for him to enter into the kingdom of

the unconscious, for him to sleep with psychoanalysis, with consequences in the end as dramatic for us as those of Oedipus's adventure for his people, he too had to put an end to seduction, had to kill the enigmatic beast, the Sphinx of appearances, that forbade the entry of "psychic reality." Freud privately perpetuates this execution of the seductress "in the wish either to raze or to entomb inside the self a maternal archaic seduction, Sphinx, witch or perverse nurse."

However, Monique Schneider, if she clearly points out this inaugural exorcism of psychoanalysis and how the whole Freudian edifice is constructed on this conjuration of seduction, here only substitutes the murder of the Mother for that of the Father, in the sense that for her seduction is never anything but that of the archaic Mother, of the devouring seductress, of the fusional womb. Seduction reduced to the seductress, and she in turn to the woman's, and the womb's, unfathomable power of absorption. This is the dirty trick played by modern feminism, itself misled by psychoanalysis: to resuscitate the feminine as a dangerous, archaic, fusional power is in some sense to side with Freud, whose purpose is to bar the Mother's power of absorbing desire by the Name of the Father. If seduction is a matter only of fusion, then we might as well have the Oedipal complex as well as the Law. That kind of seduction is really nothing but seduction seen through the prism of the Oedipal complex and the Law, like a sort of spectrum of diabolical, incestuous temptation. Like Jocasta, who—once the real figure of seduction, the enigmatic Sphinx, has been destroyed and immolated—will be reincarnated, but for the worse, so to speak, in a universe corrupted by the Oedipal complex, vengeance and the backfire of seduction. But it is no longer the same figure; that of the Sphinx is dual and enigmatic; the other, that of Jocasta, is maternal and incestuous, archaic and fusional.

Seduction is quite a different thing from this devouring mother that Freud had such good reasons to fear. If psychoanalysis (the Law, the Father, etc.) is what tears you from the Mother's desire for fusion and returns you to the sovereignty of your own desire, seduction is what tears you from your own desire to return you to the sovereignty of the world. It's what tears beings from the psychological sphere of fantasy, repression, the primal scene, to return them to the vertiginous and superficial play of appearances. It's what tears beings away from the reign of metaphor to return them to that of metamorphoses. It is what tears beings and things from the reign of interpretation to return them to divination. It has an initiatory form, and it restores to signs their power. It cannot therefore coexist with a discipline that can give signs only a meaning, and an unhappy one at that.

Dreams, however, are something other than mere "material." They charm, and are charmingly prophetic before they disappear into interpretation, where of course they take on the meaning they are supposed to. Then they are no longer seductive, nor fatal; they've become significant. Dreams used to have a secret; Freud gave them a sense. Dreams used to be closer to destiny; with Freud they approach desire. But they lose this enchantment (even a wicked one), giving way to the work of the unconscious. The play of the dream as appearance allowed us to find there not unconscious and metaphorical pathways, but effects of seduction, the trajectory of an order of events of which the dream is a part as in a story—not as a symptom, for then it is only a sign driven toward its sense. As a pure event the dream has a prophetic quality that analytical interpretation breaks down, by reducing the dream to an unconscious economy and topology.

The dream has become psychological, has fallen into the psychic order. It has lost its own seduction. Like neuroses, like

fantasies, parapraxes, madness, and sickness in general, which psychoanalysis has quarantined in the unconscious and consecrated to pathology; to all of these interpretation has assigned the vocation of symptom (and Freud only barely missed wrecking the same havoc with wit).

“I can stand dreams only when they’re whole, intact and mysterious. They are so weird that we can understand them only very slowly... Unfortunate would be the madman who understood them too soon: he would lose them never to find them again.

We should not pile together dreams that have nothing in common with each other, either. Their importance is exactly commensurate with their dissemination in reality. The essential thing, in any case, is that dreams be realized (which they no longer are in psychoanalysis, any more than childhood, and many other things that are no longer called upon to exist as such). But dreams are realized otherwise than traditional interpreters imagine them to be. Dreams must animate reality by penetrating it in every possible way, by coming from all possible directions, and especially from where we least expect them. The intangible nevertheless has its form, fashioned by its insertion into reality, and we shouldn’t impose one on it from the outside.

The harm done by the interpretation of dreams is immeasurable. The change is invisible, but a dream is so sensitive a thing! Only an infinitesimal minority of people realize what is so special about the dream. Why else would people dare to keep undressing it until they’ve made it nothing more than an ordinary truism?”

— Canetti

I think that there's an essence of the dream, as of all things, that is to say, an ideal figure whose illusive power has been stolen from us by psychoanalysis. I think there's a form of appearance, an ideal figure of appearance whose power of illusion has been ravished from us by interpretation.

Psychoanalysis is the bad conscience of the sign. It transforms every sign into symptom, every act into a slip, every discourse into hidden meaning, every representation into an hallucination of desire. This incredible near-sightedness of analytical interpretation! Against the seductive power of thought, psychoanalysis incarnates the omnipotence of hidden motives. Suspicion toward appearances, blackmail by symptom and hidden meaning, the solution of the enigma: psychoanalysis absolutely participates in the misfortune, in the bad conscience that Nietzsche identified as the source of all backward worlds...

But seduction has its way of evening the score. It ironically refashions the dream, appearing again in the well-known form of dreams of healing that attempt to seduce the analyst and divert the analysis. But this is nothing: the resolution of the enigma and the defeat of the Sphinx will allow all the hidden obscenity of Oedipal relations to burst out—murder, incest and the final blindness that always accompanies the unveiling of the *truth*. We should never touch upon the enigma, under pain of falling into obscenity, and Oedipus will have no other resort but to become blind in order to escape this obscenity. Yes, the Sphinx is avenged: it's she who by her death locks Oedipus up into this whole murderous history, and she who locks up Freud into this whole case history of castration.

The Fatal, or, Reversible Imminence

"Chance tires me."—God.

"In a remote Yugoslavian valley, it seems they've abolished chance, thanks to a certain throw of the dice." To which we answer: any throw of the dice ended chance long ago.

Two hypotheses about chance. First: all things are called to meet each other, it is only by chance that they don't. Second: all things are scattered and indifferent to each other; it is only by chance that they meet once in a while.

This last hypothesis is commonly held; the other one, paradoxically, is the more interesting.

At all events there remains, in the commonly held version, a profound ambiguity: is it chance that keeps things in a state of aleatory dispersion (this corresponds to its definition), or is it what causes them to meet up from time to time? We would be happy to have it both ways. Things happen by chance, and chance causes them to meet. This is purely illogical. Does chance reveal the sovereign indifference of things to each other, or does it betray a secret will, a kind of evil genie that would take pleasure in unusual conjugations?

The solution might be this latter: modern analysis long ago brought to light the flaws of a determinist explanation of the world and gave birth to an aleatory world at the expense of objective causality; it has therefore stimulated everywhere a vision in terms of chance, and at the same time it's awakened people to other connections, noncausal and more secret (psychoanalysis, for example, and its unconscious interpretation, have eliminated the element of chance in slips, failures, dreams, and madness). More enigmatic, another necessity has appeared, and nothing in principle can escape it: whether psychological or structural predestination, the deep

order of things is unconscious, but its decrees eliminate chance nonetheless. We have thus substituted, for the reign of intelligible causes, not really chance, but a mechanism of more mysterious linkages. Chance would then correspond not to a temporary incapacity of science to explain everything—in that case it would still have a palpable conceptual existence—but to the passing from a state of causal determination to another order, radically different, also of non-chance.

There's another problem, too. For there to be chance (in the second sense, at least) there must be coincidence: two series have to intersect, two events, two individuals, two particles must meet. Even if the probability of this occurrence is infinitesimal, there must be a possibility for this conjunction to take place, in the same sense that, for there to be causality, there must be some contiguity of cause and effect. Now, this postulate is never certain. *But it's not certain either that the encounter is impossible*—unless in a world given over to a pure power relationship, where things, bodies, individuals, events can touch each other, bump and run into each other because they've lost this "aura" that normally envelopes them and forbids all promiscuity. In a sacred, ceremonial universe, things do not touch each other, and they never meet. They link up without fail, but without contact. Tact in this matter is precisely avoiding contact. Remark how ceremonial gestures, dress, and bodies roll, intertwine, brush past each other, challenge one another, but without ever touching. No chance, that is, no slip that would hurl the bodies toward each other, no disorder that would suddenly allow things the liberty of confusion.

The same is true of our bodies and daily lives. We had to break up this aura that surrounds acts and bodies for them to be able to meet by chance in the street, concentrate in such great number in

cities or camps, draw close or melt into each other in love. A very powerful force was required to break this magnetic distance where each body moves, as well as to produce this indifferent space where chance is able to put them in contact. Something of this refractory power remains in each of us, even at the heart of the modern secularized spaces, even in the use we make of our emancipated, spatially liberated bodies. Something comparable in power to the taboo that averted all promiscuity, to the distinction that condemned all fortuitous meeting, all fusion or confusion due to chance. Chance is only the freedom that bodies have—like particles at the microscopic level—to move in any direction in an undifferentiated space. And this freedom implies that for every being an inviolable space, from a symbolic point of view, is unclean and obscene. (This has nothing to do with any kind of Puritanism, but really with the sovereign space necessary for the very movement of bodies.) Chance, therefore, along with the statistical probability that characterizes our modern world, are unclean and obscene modalities. Right now we must accommodate all of this in the name of freedom; but one day, this refusal—this untying that makes multiple meetings possible, accelerating the Brownian movement of our lives—will return with a deadly indetermination and indifference, and overwhelm us. Chance not only tires God, it tires us too.

Western materialism works on the hypothesis that the world is brute matter, subject to aleatory and disorganized movements. Our world's "primitive scene" is that which would remain lifeless if some God did not come along to breathe soul, or sense, or energy into it. This is a disorder that God alone can cure, by imposing order, tearing the world away from a state of original chaos.

“Chance contained order, and when order came it allowed a place in creation for chance.” (A. Verdet)

The problem has always been to create order out of supposed disorder, to produce and support movement, to sustain and produce meaning. This is what haunts us; it is our ideal, as well as the profile of our catastrophe (entropy).

The idea that we achieve a few rational moments in this world of ours only at the price of perpetual effort, that we have to be constantly on guard against a lapse into nothingness—this hypothesis is functionally pessimist and desperate. Even God has had enough of it. “Chance tires God”, says a theologian on the subject of making gambling illegal. God himself is fed up with fighting against chance (recently, moreover, he’s lowered his flags, allowing an openly random vision of the world to dominate). There is no other end for something that’s begun this way. If you suppose that an energy is necessary to fill the universe, to create meaningful connections, fragile islands of antichance, then sooner or later this energy will fail. Even God won’t be strong enough to resist the ultimate annihilation of meaning. Anyone would have given up on this; He himself has stopped fighting it, effacing himself before the irruption of a meaningless universe. God is not scandalized, ulcerated or threatened by chance; He’s tired of it. Marvellous!

But you might adopt the opposite hypothesis. God has not grown tired of struggling against chance; rather, he is fatigued with *having to reproduce it*. It’s God himself who’s trapped in this eternal task, for the truth is that *there is no chance*. If chance had to be created, only a god could do it, for it’s a superhuman job.

Creating chance, so that everything doesn’t always connect necessarily and without discontinuity: whether lucky or unlucky, this would be intolerable for man. Creating chance, so that people

can play and believe in fortune and misfortune, which lessens their guilt.

The vital importance of this belief in the possibility of the purely accidental occurrence, which would therefore be insignificant, indifferent, and irresponsible! For example: the death of a friend, a reversal in fortune, a natural catastrophe. What if these things—outside of the fact that “they never happen just by themselves”—should be moreover attributable to a will, to an objective or subjective malignity, even God’s? What a weight, what a burden, what an increase in responsibility and fault! And where would there be room for an innocent expectation of the future?

Primitives believed in a world of this kind, a world of the omnipotent thought and will, without the shadow of a chance. But they lived really in magic and cruelty. Chance lets us breathe: no one wanted it to happen, what a consolation! So it is God, in his immense pity, who has granted us chance. We often say, of an event that we want to be rid of, “God willed it.” (That is to say, no one.) But God has grown tired, in the end, from having willed it, and it is quite possible that once in a while he withdraws his will and leaves the world prey to the law of things, that is, to total predestination.

Chance is attributable to a God even more extraordinary than the one who manages everything with his will, than the one of universal predestination or the providential and fateful linking of everything. Nothing is easier for things than to connect, to metamorphose one into the other. To prevent that—to obtain a purely accidental world—we need to suppose an infinite will and energy. God himself would never get through with this fantastic labor of isolating every particle, of abolishing all sequence, all scattered seductions, to maintain the absolute reign of chance. What artifice is involved in chance, and how small was the

probability that it could ever come to exist (as unlikely as the probability of God's existence)!

God—our old rational and rationalist God—is evidently incapable of managing the course of things. His *raison d'être* is to guarantee, to bless certain causal connections, allowing him to make a last judgement on the world, piercing through, at certain places, the fog that obscures his luminous gaze upon chaos, so that some kind of minimal distinction can be made between Good and Evil. And the Devil is constantly threatening to confuse these tedious labors. Seduction is operating ceaselessly to blur this separation of Good from Evil. It's no surprise that God has died, leaving behind a perfectly free and random world, and leaving the task of organizing things to a blind divinity named Chance.

God scarcely held up his side of the bargain. He—who was supposed to be there in order to be the cause of everything—ended up arranging things so that what happens without reason, what arrives through an extremely rare and unlikely probability, is more meaningful than what happens as a result of a cause. What happens accidentally takes on a meaning and intensity that we no longer assign to rational occurrence. In an overdetermined world, chance is the creator of special effects.

Chance itself is a special effect; it assumes in imagination the perfection of the accident (as, in a series of objects, only the missing one is especially precious). We live in a paradoxical world, where the accidental thing is more meaningful, more charming, than intelligible connections. It is possible that this situation is itself a matter of conjuncture: the superior charm and meaning that we find in accident, the ironic and diabolical joy we take in accidental events, is doubtless equalled only by the pleasure of the first mind capable of inventing, though in a chaotic world, the

first causal relation. That individual, in his time, was certainly considered to be the Devil; he must have been burned at the stake for his trouble.

But all of this is based on the flawed hypothesis of a chaotic world, one we have to fight against by rational connections. Whereas the inverse hypothesis is much richer and infinitely more plausible: that this is a world where there is no such thing as chance. Nothing is dead, nothing is inert, nothing is disconnected, uncorrelated or aleatory. Everything, on the contrary, is fatally, admirably connected—not at all according to rational relations (which are neither fatal nor admirable), but according to an incessant cycle of metamorphoses, according to the seductive rapports of form and appearance. Seen as substance in need of energy, the world lives in the inert terror of the random, it is shattered by chance. Seen as the order of appearances and their senseless unravelling, seen as pure event, the world is, on the contrary, ruled by absolute necessity. From this angle, everything bursts with connection, seduction; nothing is isolated, nothing happens by chance—there is total correlation. The problem would be rather to brake, to arrest at certain points this total correlation of events, to stop this vertigo of seduction, of the linking of forms one by the other, this magic order (for some, disorder) that we see spontaneously arise in the form of linked sequences or coincidences (lucky or unlucky), or in the form of destiny, or ineluctable connection, when everything falls into order as if by miracle.

We're all familiar with this experience; it includes writing and speech. Words have this same tendency, when we allow them their free play, to assume the order of destiny. All of language can be engulfed in a single phrase, by an effect of seduction that precipitates the floating signs toward a central series. We know this chain

reaction, we know how undeniably it occurs. We know the strange familiarity that belongs to things when their course is unimpeded, when they relate in the pure contiguity of an event. When we don't struggle against them with our rational systems and our logical, goal-oriented constructions, or see in them only the secondary consequences of a history that's already taken place.

All of this is close to what Lévi-Strauss called, in linguistic terms, the excess of the signifier—the idea that the signifier is there from the beginning, spread everywhere, in a profusion that happily the signified never exhausts. This overabundant order of the signifier is that of magic (and poetry). It is not an order of chance or indetermination; far from that, it is rather an arranged order, a necessity superior to the one which joins the signifier and the signified (which itself is highly arbitrary). The long work of joining signifier and signified, the work of reason, somehow brakes and absorbs this fatal profusion. The magical seduction of the world must be reduced, annulled. And it will be so the day when all signifiers receive their signifieds, when all has become meaning and reality.

This would be, quite obviously, the world's end. The world will end—literally—when all seductive rapports yield to rational ones. This is precisely the catastrophic enterprise on which we are engaged: resolving all fatality into causality or probability. That is true entropy. We may wonder if it could ever succeed, but what we should not doubt is that it is fate, not chance, which is the “natural” course of things. And that it is destiny—that is to say, the flashing seduction of forms—that reason seeks to destroy, and not chance, which reason can very well live with. Remember, chance contained order, and when order came it left place in creation for chance.

The work of reason is not at all to invent connections, relations, meaning. There's too much of that already. On the contrary, reason seeks to manufacture the neutered, to create the indifferent, to demagnetize inseparable constellations and configurations, to make them erratic elements sworn finally to finding their cause or to wandering at random. Reason seeks to break the incessant cycle of appearances. Chance—the possibility of indeterminate elements, their respective indifference, and, in a word, their freedom—results from this dismantling.

In short, the only chance there is is the one we've artificially produced by the liquidation of forms. Chance never existed, especially not from the beginning, the way we like to think about it. Originally, all forms can be explained one by the other, or rather they necessarily imply one another. *There is no void*, and for there to be chance there must be a void: points at which all substance and form melt together, intervals when there is literally nothing. And this, for a way of thinking other than our own modern one, would be unthinkable.

It's not by chance (!) that chance and the void were discovered at the same time, in the seventeenth century, with Pascal and Toricelli.⁷ Modern man literally invented these neutral concepts, these simulations of absence: chance; emptiness; a world without bond, form, destiny; a space without content. Two formal abstractions, bases for a modernity from which fatality and grace began then to withdraw, leaving the field open for experimental demiurgy and statistical extermination.

Games of chance paradoxically illustrate this absence of chance, its radical denial in the very spirit of the player. What the

7. Jacques Brosse, *Traverses* #23.

gambler wants is certainly not to be tuned into the “law” of probabilities and great numbers. This would hardly be exciting, no more than any objective sequence. The gambler is rather looking for chance, but not chance as random effect, punctual and contingent. He wants chance as a sign of election, as a process of general seduction, which it is the rule of the game to capture (this has nothing to do with the laws of probability). The gambler is looking for chain reaction, charming catastrophe.

All strategy in the sphere of the game is aimed at provoking a deescalation of rational causes and an inverse escalation of magical linkage. Not one lucky occasion, then another, throw by throw (the famous equiprobability of chance at every throw), but on the contrary a fatal sequence of lucky throws (or unlucky throws: what is essential is not to win but to be fatal, to trap fate in its own game, where nothing can any longer arrest the production of a world given up to the pure solicitation of mind). Chance, we know, is only chance if it snowballs, just like catastrophe; chance has nothing to do with an objective probability that stops and allows for calculation. Chance must be *forced*, duly solicited, duly seduced. God can only respond; he can only give you *everything*. He can only let things happen according to their destiny, which is to link all forms (including numbers) together without exception, without accident, without fail. This is the basic rule of the game, and God himself is subject to it. This is the basic rule of the world’s secret organization, of all the wondrous conjugation of forms according to destiny. This allows the arbitrary modality of the game (concrete rules) for ceremonial purposes (and not for contractual purposes, as in exchanges regulated by law), as a perfectly conventional ritual where there is reflected—not without a glimmer of irony—the absolute necessity that underlies hope.

We are all gamblers. What we desire most intensely is that the inexorable procession of rational connections cease for a while. That there be installed, even for a short time, an unheard-of unravelling of another kind, a marvellous escalation of events, an extraordinary succession, as if predestined, of the smallest details, to the point where we think that things—until now maintained artificially at a distance through a contract of succession and causality—suddenly find themselves, not delivered over to chance, but converging spontaneously, concurring through their very connection in this selfsame intensity

That gives us pleasure. Those are our real events. This obvious fact that nothing is neutral or indifferent—that all things converge if only we can eliminate their “objective” causal contract—this is the very evidence of seduction. To circumvent the circuits of causality, arbitrary signs must be projected, some kind of arbitrary codes, which is what the rules of a game are. These are the temptations that are going to upset the causal system and the objective way things proceed and *reengage their fatal linkage*. These are the real challenges that we commonly throw down, just like the player in the game.

Writing itself does that. Whether poetry or theory, it's nothing but the projection of an arbitrary code, an arbitrary system (an invention of the rules of a game) where things come to be taken in their fatal development. Those little catastrophes like the collapse of meaning, those effects of the turbulence of events, we may interpret them, as does David Ruelle,⁸ as part of a rational logic of the unexpected, according to what he calls “the sensitive dependency of initial conditions” of systems. Such a system is affected

8. David Ruelle, *Traverses* #23.

from the beginning with a minimal disturbance that is amplified existentially (especially in proximity to strange attractors) with incalculable consequences within a relatively short time. "A sneeze can cause a cyclone months later in another part of the world." A fascinating connection, by the very exaggeration of the effect, but one which remains objective and determinist right up to its very unpredictability.

I think, though, that something else is at work in these sudden escalations that surprise the course of things. What happens here is a logical mutation, and not simply a matter of exponential logic. A little as in the dream according to Freud, where words, emptied of their meaning, begin to function as things, and are all brought back to the same primordial, brute material state, to link together in their material imminence, senseless (but not random) beyond all syntax and all principle of coherence. Where words *take themselves* for things and are suddenly caught in the play of things. Similarly, sometimes events are caught in a game beyond all psychology and objective causality, trapped in the game and doubling their bets, paying no attention to what history has to say in the matter. Situations themselves can escape from their meanings and, in a suprasensual linking, they also want to become events. The connections so created seem catastrophic, telescoped, like the unexpected turbulence of events, but which, like the "free" coupling of words in dreams, preserve the character of an extraordinary necessity. Little accelerated gravitations, little "cyclones" are thus born in events themselves, near the subject, but outside of it—pure events, where the subject himself is no longer a word but a thing, and functions at the mercy of things.

In a dream, I have just emerged from a terrible but enigmatic period of mourning. Someone tells me that the mourning actually

passed quite quickly. I reply that it's always like that, and everyone around me bursts into manic laughter. I've unleashed a kind of laughing catastrophe. And through this coincidence between the little I've said and its exaggerated effect, I feel mysteriously swept aside, erased. What was it I unleashed without knowing it? Or rather, into what prodigious relation have I entered without wanting to? A connection that can only depend on *exactly what I've said*, not on what I am, nor even on the dream situation—it must depend precisely upon the insignificance of my words and their very banality.

What more is there to say? Nothing is closer to this delicious, vertiginous, insoluble sensation of being the decisive element in some situation without willing it, than pleasing someone with a single glance. A tiny cause, an extraordinary effect: it's the only proof we have of the existence of God. Incalculable connections are the stuff of our dreams, but also of our daily bread. We like nothing more than this crazy imbalance of cause and effect—it opens fabulous horizons on our origins and on our potential power. They say that seduction is a strategy. Nothing could be more wrong. Seduction is a matter of these unexpected connections that any strategy can at best only attempt to reproduce.

The cause *produces* the effect. Causes therefore always have a meaning and an end. They never lead to catastrophe (they know only crisis). Catastrophe is the abolition of causes. It submerges cause beneath the effect. It hurls causal connection into the abyss, restoring for things their pure appearance or disappearance (as in the apparition of the purely social and its simultaneous disappearance in panic). This is not, however, a matter of chance or indeterminacy; rather it is a kind of spontaneous connection of

appearances, or of the spontaneous escalation of wills, as in the challenge. Or it can come across as a sudden commutation of forms, as in metamorphosis.

It is never causes but rather appearances that, when they link themselves up, lead to catastrophe. Unlike the crisis, which is only the disorder of causes, catastrophe is the delirium of forms and appearances. Just as delusion is the pure, nonreferential linkage of language, just as ceremony is the pure, nonreferential linkage of gestures, rites, and costumes, so catastrophe is the pure, nonreferential connection of things and events. There is no chance at work in all of this. It is rather a formal linkage of the highest necessity. (This necessity is found in the absurd escalation of negative and grotesque events that can sometimes happen to us: instead of accumulating in sadness and collapsing into ridicule—as would be the case if chance alone were the reason for their juxtaposition—things fall apart, cancelling each other out in a kind of spontaneous natural catastrophe, which can only end in the spasm and seduction of their formal succession and the beauty of their enlacement.)

The only real pleasure in the world is to watch things “turn” into catastrophe, to emerge finally from determinacy and indeterminacy, from chance and necessity, and enter the realm of vertiginous connections, for better or worse, where things reach their end without passing through their means, where events attain their effects without passing through causes. Like wit, like seduction—where things proceed not by the detours of sense but via the speedways of appearance.

There is no chance, then. Chance characterized the absolutely unlikely possibility that things—deprived of their determinations and their causes—would be left to themselves, truly free in effect,

floating in an aleatory hyperspace, with a few vague prospects of encounters of the third kind. This is, approximately, the fate which is reserved for us at the end of all of our liberations, in the molecular nightmare that is being prepared for us. But on another level, much more radical than the real, this is a complete impossibility. Chance, the concept of chance, supposes that no other connection but causal connection is possible. Chance, therefore, is firmly on the side of necessity: if things no longer have causes (or if they can no longer “produce” them), then they are no longer of any order, except insofar as they revert to the forced equation of probabilities. They wander like dead souls in the purgatory of the aleatory. Chance is the purgatory of causality, where souls are waiting to be given back their bodies, where effects are waiting for their cause. Just before the nuclear hell where, decidedly, they will be forever annihilated.

But things are linked in other ways than through their causes. Take fatality (which we mostly confuse with chance in its mortal effects), for example. I remember a time when, miraculously saved from going over a cliff in a car, some Spaniards stopped on the side of the road to touch us religiously, repeating: “*Suerte, suerte.*”*

In fatality or destiny, the linkage, far from being causal, is rather this: the sign of the apparition of things is also the sign of their disappearance. The sign of their birth will be the sign of their death. Meanwhile you can try to upset the order of reason, to change the course of things, to run along under other skies or undergo psychoanalysis. Nothing doing—the same sign, the same constellation, the same character trait, the same little event that was there at birth reappears there at the moment of death. The emblem of elevation is the same as at the fall, the emblem of appearance is that of disappearance.

That's destiny. You can always go at it with your interpretations, but it's useless. No code, no cipher. The efficacy of a single sign. This doesn't necessarily concern an entire life, nor a whole dynasty, as in classical tragedy. It may be only a brief sequence. But with a fatal connection, there is neither the rational nor the accidental. Nothing is less accidental than the same sign presiding over the beginning and the end. Compared to that, everything else is accidental; everything else is chance—but that, that is the *fatum*. The fatal is absolutely opposed to the accidental (as well as to the rational, of course). We have already long preferred the accidental version of the world (when the rational version fails us) to the fatal version. Our preferred version of the apparent disorder of the world is one of chance and accident. Now—contrary to what people think—it is likely that the accidental is extremely rare. Chance is improbable, and fatality quite frequent. Most of the time we lose everything on the number that won everything for us before, and not only at the gambling table. You could say it is hardly remarkable that people always play the same number—but that's the point: *it's no accident* they play the same number.

Contrary to our whole virtuous morality, things have a predestined linkage. Instead of deploying according to a genesis and an evolution, they inscribe themselves in advance in their disappearance. It is prophecy that distinguishes them, not foresight. If you are aware of the sign of an appearance, then the hypothesis of fatality—which is that the course of things or the vicissitudes of the game will ineluctably lead back to the same point, to the fatal intersection of the same sign—allows us to predict the event, the event coming with a sure sign. We may then follow the course of events as we would the progress of a ceremony, the ceremony of the world, which it celebrates in changeless character. Not everything is destiny,

not everything is ceremony, but there are certainly, in each existence and in the disorder of its causes and effects, little immutable sequences of the very highest interest.

Two events, ten years apart. No connection between them. Two disappearances the equivalent of symbolic murder. Something—how to say it—spiritually inexpiable. The first time I was the one who disappeared in this way; the second time I was the one abandoned, and without the shadow of a reason. This doesn't at all reestablish a zero-sum equilibrium, and nothing was redeemed (what could there have been to redeem?). But the story demands that a reversibility be subtly established between two events that are secret from each other, between which, furthermore, I have never made any connection (I should have; these were the only two persons I dreamt about for years). Then one day the two episodes appeared to me under the same sign, and were suddenly resolved in the beauty of this conjunction. This sign was a name. Both persons bore the same first name. No one can say what infinitesimal trace things will pick for their denouement, but we can be sure that it is not by chance. In this case the illumination was accomplished on the basis of the coincidence of names. Suddenly these two events that had remained unexpiated, since they were without history—(there had been nothing to tell, neither fable nor alibi, neither good nor bad reasons, nothing; the disappearances were innocent and definitive, even though we ordinarily resolve things only through fiction or psychology)—entered into another, much more extraordinary mode of resolution. They united in a kind of witticism; through a certain predestination they found each other, these two phantom events, and both were released and unbound from what made them separately unintelligible. Their duplication, their twin

imagination, their conjunction made them suddenly understandable, without the secret of either one ever having been lifted. What could have happened, psychologically, on both sides, in the two cases? It was unimportant to me; whatever it was that had been meaningless was resolved in another kind of linkage.

I saved on psychoanalysis (the futility of the unconscious).

The power of events that happen to you without your having willed them, without your having anything to do with it. But not by chance. They happen, and this coincidence touches you, it's destined for you. Even if you didn't want it, *because* you didn't want it, you're seduced by it. That's the whole difference between destiny and chance. For pure chance, even supposing that it exists, is entirely indifferent to us; pure occurrence has nothing seductive about it for us—it's objective, period. It is this strategy of chance we adopt to neutralize an event or attenuate its effect: "It happened by chance" (not my doing). The accidental death of a friend, of someone close, cannot fail to arouse some guilty fantasy. Or else the unbearable idea that the other person abandoned you, dying by whim. Anything is better than this mental cruelty of a world entirely ruled by the omnipotence of thought. And here chance is quite helpful: it's enough to think (difficult as that is) that things happen without reason, or for a maximum of objective reasons (technical, material, statistical) that remove the responsibility from us, and which, in fact, absolve us from whatever the event could contain of a profoundly *seductive* nature, whose cause we might have wanted to be. For we would like to be the reason for anyone's death (as for anyone's life or good fortune). And there is nothing revolting about this; it does not mean we want anyone to die. But we prefer to have wanted it than to have it happen by accident. Desiring the death of another may be

terrible from a moral point of view, but for death to be a pure function of chance is unbearable from a symbolic point of view, which is an even more fundamental one. Thus, from a moral point of view, we may want to protect ourselves by all sorts of alibis (including chance), from the fatal interconnections of events, but from a symbolic perspective it is deeply repugnant to have a neutral world, ruled by chance and thus innocuous and meaningless, and similarly for a world ruled by objective causes; neither one, although easier to live, can resist the fascinating imagination of a universe entirely ruled by a divine or diabolical chain of *willed* coincidences, that is, a universe where we seduce events, where we induce them and make them happen by the omnipotence of thought—a cruel universe where no one is innocent, and especially not us, a universe where our subjectivity has dissolved (and we joyously accept it) because it has been absorbed into the automatism of events, into their objective unfolding. It has in some way become a world. Let us not forget that if we want to lay claim to the minimal wisdom which says that *it is fundamentally necessary to have willed this world*, in one way or another to have loved it, one way or another to have invented it, it is then also necessary that neither your friend's death, nor any other incidence or catastrophe, escape your thought and will.

We *would like* there to be chance, senselessness, and therefore innocence, and for the gods to continue their game of dice with the universe, but we *prefer* sovereignty, cruelty, fatal interconnection to be all-pervasive, we prefer events to be the radical consequences of thought. We like this, but we prefer that. Likewise we like events to link up according to their causes, but we prefer chance and pure coincidence to pervade the world. Above all I believe that we prefer the fatal connection. Determinism will never abolish chance. But no chance will ever abolish fate.

“What happens is so far ahead of our thoughts, our intentions, that we can never catch up to it or ever really come to know it.”

— Rainer Maria Rilke

This is the definition of fate: the precession of the effects over their very causes. So all things happen before having happened. Reasons come after. Sometimes things even disappear before happening, before having occurred. What, then, do we know of them?

The fact that things are in advance of the unfolding of their causes, their precession in time—that is their secret. It is the secret of their seduction, and also that which prevents the real from ever occurring, for the real is only the coincidence in time of an event and a causal sequence.

When things go faster than their causes, they have the time to *appear*, to occur as appearances before even becoming real. It's then that they keep their power of seduction.

Speed itself is doubtless only this: throughout and beyond all technology, the temptation for things and people to go faster than their cause, to thereby catch up to their beginning and annul it. As such, it is a vertiginous mode of disappearance (Paul Virilio). But writing is another: going faster than the conceptual connections—this is the secret of writing.

In comparison to this catastrophic occurrence—catastrophe is always ahead of the normal schedule; it's always a telescoping, a sudden instantaneity of time, a seism that pulls together the separated edges of time—meaning is always too late. It is like Kafka's Messiah, who will come only when he is no longer needed, not on the Day of Last Judgement, but the day after.

This is the eternal delay to which things are condemned by meaning. Forever to invent causes in order to dispell the prestige of their apparition, forever to invent meaning to dispel appearances, to delay their too-rapid linkage.

This reversibility of causal order—the reversion of cause on effect, the precession and triumph of effect over cause—is fundamental. You might call it primordial, fatal and original. It is the reversibility of destiny. It somehow represents a mortal danger, precisely because it leaves no place for chance (chance can only be deduced, *a contrario*, on an order of causality). This is why our system, essentially Western, has replaced it with another precession, that of the cause to the effect, and more recently with the precession of models, the precession of simulacra to things themselves, whose apparition they conjure up in a different mode. Precession against precession—we need to see the challenge that opposes the two orders. There is no place for chance here, that is, for a neutral and indeterminate substance. The world is Manichean; in it two orders are absolutely opposed. Nothing is determined, but everything is antagonistic.

This is why we have to go much farther than a simple crisis of causality. Things can be in crisis only in a “normal” order of succession. Crisis is the management of causality: liberate the causes and find a rational connection of effects and causes; while in this sudden precession, in this reversibility of the event that devours its own cause, things no longer even have the time to see themselves contested in their principle and corrected as they proceed. Pure contingency, accidentality, the brutal upending of the real and its representation—as Clement Rosset would say—leaves a critical temporality of meaning no chance. This is the order of apparition and pure appearance. Everything is staked on this somersault of meaning.

This is what science catches a glimpse of when, not happy with calling into question the determinist principle of causality (the first revolution), it intuits—beyond even the uncertainty principle, which still functions like hyperrationality—that chance is the floating of all laws. This is already quite extraordinary. But what science senses now, at the physical and biological limits of its exercise, is that there is not only this floating, this uncertainty, but a possible *reversibility* of physical laws. That would be the *absolute enigma*, not some ultraformula or metaequation of the universe (which the theory of relativity was), but the idea that any law can be reversed (not only particles into antiparticles, matter into antimatter, but the laws themselves). The hypothesis of this reversibility has always been affirmed by the great metaphysical systems. It is the fundamental rule of the game of appearance, of the metamorphosis of appearances, against the irreversible order of time, of law and meaning. But it's fascinating to see science arrive at the same hypotheses, contrary to its own logic and evolution.

Consequently, neither causality nor determinism—nor even floating causality, probability, uncertainty or relativity, which would be the last word in this matter—but rather reversion and reversibility.

Things would then neither be linked according to law, nor free and indeterminate according to chance, but reversible according to the rule. The problem this poses is, therefore: how is it that from a reversible order there could have been established an irreversible one—that of time, causality, history, and chance itself? But perhaps all of that only lends our world an *effect* of irreversibility, and perhaps this is in the process of changing. What if even physical laws, the surest guarantee of the effect of irreversible causality in the universe, are slipping so gently into the reversible?

In any case it is from this reversibility, and not from causality, that we should expect unheard-of effects. It is from there, and not from chance and its ridiculous statistical objectivity, we must expect a surprise—the art of escaping both chance and necessity, the art of a certain turning, fatal and enigmatic, that rules over the order of the apparition and the disappearance of things.

The Illusionist and the Rose of Paracelsus

The illusionist, master of his art, dreams of accomplishing the great transmutation: to make a woman disappear before your very eyes, right on stage. There's nothing easier than getting rid of the rabbit, the scarf, the hat—nothing to it; but making a woman disappear is something he's never managed to do, and he dreams of it. Now, one night, during the performance, he brings the house down: the lady has vanished. He did it, but how? The whole problem is finding out by what secret paths, by what unexpected detour he succeeded (maybe it was enough just to think about it, to imagine her having disappeared—which isn't so easy). But perhaps it was not some power that made her disappear, but chance, which he had nothing to do with, of which he was only a conductor.

The other story: that of Paracelsus. A student comes to visit; he wants Paracelsus to become his teacher and teach him his powers. But he wants immediate proof of them. Paracelsus is reluctant. The student insists, throwing the rose he is holding into the fireplace and defying Paracelsus to resurrect it. Paracelsus declines, saying he can't. The student, disappointed and angry, leaves. Then Paracelsus leans over the fireplace, pronounces a single word, and the rose is fully revived.

Borges's tale is impenetrable in that, outside of a rather conventional story of teacher and student, it is almost impossible in the end to know if Paracelsus is really able to revive the rose with a word, or if he simply tries to do it, and by miracle or chance, it "works," the most surprised of all being Paracelsus himself. He actually wasn't lying when he told the disciple he didn't have the power to do it; the power came to him unexpectedly; perhaps it was not a power at all, but chance, accident, an occurrence remaining forever a mystery.

By what effect, which would be neither chance (too improbable) nor a power (too easy), would the woman disappear and the rose reappear? We have to think. (Why search for plausibility in imaginary stories? But these, and never the true stories, are precisely the ones that require a secret solution; they are like witticisms that demand a witty kind of analysis.) And this hypothesis, as we are well aware, has a lot that is unreal about it, as much unreality as the evidence that is missing and will always be missing—we have to think that everything turns on a reversible imminence of things that it is enough simply to grasp. When it comes down to it, there is really no good reason why the lady shouldn't vanish, and that is the magician's secret: everything real is ready, indeed, immediately inclined to disappear—simply waiting for it, you could say. It is enough to dispel the will to reality, the will to persist and to exist that makes things last beyond their apparition. Or perhaps we need to grasp the rule according to which, as soon as something appears, it can only disappear. In this manner things ask only to seduce; it's enough to dispel their will to meaning. Both go together, in fact. To make the lady vanish you have to seduce her (detour her from her real, all too-real existence). To revive the rose, it is enough to seduce it (detour it from its ashen inexistence). For to seduce things

is to put them back into their cycle of appearance and disappearance, of incessant metamorphoses, and to put yourself back in the cycle, where there is neither chance nor power, but where appearance and disappearance are linked according to the ineluctable rule (this is destiny). According to a linear and willed order, the lady can never vanish, the rose can never reappear. They can only do this in a reversible order, where all the art lies in positioning oneself.

The Ceremony of the World

In the order of highly conventional and perfectly arranged connections, in the order of connections devoid of the greatest necessity, ceremony is the equivalent of fatality.

An ecstatic connection like that of the game: ceremony has no meaning, it has only esoteric rule. It has no end, since it is initiatory.

In it we find the definitively factitious and conventional order of the world exalted, the occult objectivity that shines behind the subjectivity of appearances.

They say that savage thinking (*la pensée sauvage*) subjectivizes everything, without taking into account the objectivity of the world. But it is we who, behind our alibi of objective reason, subjectivize, psychologize, and impose everywhere an occult subjectivity.

The ceremony puts an end to this occultism of subjectivity.

Let him (the Brahmin) never look at the sun rising or setting, or during an eclipse, or when it is reflected in water, or in the middle of its course.

Let him never step over a rope to which a cow is attached, nor run while it is raining, nor look at his image in water; such

is the established rule. Let him, when he passes, always keep to the right of a hillock, a cow, an idol, a Brahmin, a bowl of clarified butter or honey, a place where four roads meet, and the great well-known frees.

However strong his desire let him not approach his wife once her period has started, nor lie in the same bed with her. Let him not eat out of the same plate as his wife, nor look at her while she eats, sneezes, yawns—nor when she is sitting nonchalantly. Nor when she puts makeup on her eyes, or perfumes herself, nor when her breast is exposed, nor when she is giving birth.

Let him never leave his urine or his excrement on the road, nor on the ashes of a fire, nor on pasture land, nor on plowed land, nor in water, nor on a funeral pyre, nor on a mountain, nor in the ruins of a temple, nor on the nest of white ants.

Nor in holes inhabited by living creatures, nor while walking, nor standing, nor on a riverbank, nor on a mountaintop. Likewise, he should never evacuate his urine or his excrement while looking at objects shaking in the wind, nor looking at a fire, nor a Brahman, nor water, nor cows.

During the day let him evacuate facing north; at night, facing south; at dawn and at twilight, in the same way as during the day.

— The Laws of Manu, Book IV

Every detail of existence, in the code of Manu, is minutely ritualized: a theatre of cruelty, every moment marked with a necessary sign, a discrimination, a secret distinction (not at all a sociological distinction; this would be characteristic of a weaker, more banal order, a disorder of the rule and the ceremonial which yields to any

subjective evaluations—but this order, the *sociological* one, is fundamentally not very interesting) in the slightest action, the most insignificant word, the minutest bodily secretion, the least remarkable of natural events. Everything is initiatory, in the sense that nothing happens except by way of the necessary, ineluctable sign of its apparition—nothing changes except by the necessary, ineluctable signs of its metamorphoses.

That is the ceremony of the world, its perfect ordering, which is the opposite of subjective desire and objective chance. Desire and chance are stricken from the ceremony. It is no longer even a metaphor. There is no rhetoric, no allegory, no metaphysics in the text of the *Laws of Manu*. No mystery either: but the pure unfolding, the pure cipher of the ceremonial of days and nights with their obligations. Language is immanent, as is rite: it sets forth rules, and does not get involved with dialectics or psychology. It has no recourse either to justificatory or allusive myths. It tells us what to do, period. Not a system of values or interpretation: a system of rules.

Now this is where signs take on their greatest intensity: when they require only pure observance. When, like the rules of a game, they push the arbitrary, the discriminatory, to the limit. Not *difference*, which is always meaningful, but *discrimination*, which is the truly rigorous form of labeling, and the equivalent to predestination in time—that which is always already there before it has happened (thus perfectly miraculous), which takes on the power of a sign before being meaningful (thus perfectly arbitrary), which is imposed as goal before being justified (thus perfectly unjust). All of this might seem to us, in the moral, sentimental and democratic order in which we live, perfectly immoral and unjustifiable; in fact, we have long directed all our fulminations at predestination and

discrimination, while we cultivate lovingly, on the contrary, finality and difference—however, it is in predestination and discrimination that things and signs attain the highest level of intensity, fascination and *jouissance*.

The process that regulates events in the world on the basis of the occurrence of a pure sign, or in the event of a ceremonial sign, even if it were a catastrophic process, will always be more grandiose and more fascinating than that of causal development. The former, which steals our liberty and involves us in a cycle of predestination (even if it were the most banal form of “chance”) is more likely to seduce us than a process that involves a liberty and responsibility which are, in any case, equally groundless: instead of consigning ourselves to the comic sight of a liberty grappling with the problem of its own foundation, let us turn rather to the tragedy of the purely arbitrary. Each of us secretly prefers an arbitrary and cruel order, one that leaves us no choice, to the horrors of a liberal one where we don’t even know what we want, where we are forced to recognize that we don’t know what we want; for in the former case we are consigned to maximal determination, and in the second to indifference. Everyone secretly prefers an order so rigorous, an unfolding of events so arbitrary (or so illogical, as with fate or ceremony) that the slightest disturbance can make the whole thing collapse—everyone prefers this to the dialectical workings of reason, where a finalizing logic dominates all accidents of language. Without a doubt, we have a deep desire to subvert destiny, to disturb the ceremony, as well as to violate any and all orders: but this violence itself is then predestined. It takes on greater relief from the ceremonial order. It is not an informal violence; it creates a dramaturgic peripety. I’m thinking of that very beautiful scene in *Gate of Hell* where, during the long

sequence of the tea ceremony that goes on in silence, one of the knights suddenly gets up and turns over a cup: all the secret conflicts come to the surface in this single sign, whose violence is not really external to the rule—it seems to be the very tension connected with the ceremony that produces the sudden infraction as its necessary effect. Ceremonial violence appears not as a transgression, but as an exacerbation of the rule, where the whole world is suspended in the interruption of the game. The same effect is obtained in Chinese opera when all the moving warriors suddenly become still, at the high point of their dual attack, in a mute paroxysm where immobility itself does violence to movement.

All ceremonies are in this manner violent in their unfolding, but this violence is that of the reversibility of the rule, not that of the transgression of the law. The sign drags its opposite along with it through the very power of signs as such. In itself, the connection of signs in ceremony, the fact that they can succeed and engender one another solely according to the rule of the ritual, already constitutes a violence done to the real. And the fact that every ceremony is linked according to a cycle is a violence done to time. And the fact that it is organized solely on the basis of signs—thousands of pure signs whose suprasensual relation it recovers—is a violence against meaning and the logic of meaning. The entire seduction of the ceremony lies in this idolatrous, demiurgic, and barbarous violence that is opposed to the culture of meaning.

If ceremony is synonymous with slowness, it is because it is of the order of predestination and of regulated unfolding. Hurrying, as with sacrifice, would be sacrilege. The rule must be given a chance to function and gestures must have the time to be completed. Time must have the time to disappear.

The ceremony contains the presentiment of its development and its end. It has no spectators. Wherever there is spectacle, ceremony ceases, for it is also violence against representation. The space where it moves is not a stage, a scene, a space of scenic illusion: it is a locus of immanence and of the unfolding of the rule. Let's consider again the way the game works (cards, chess, chance): there is nothing less theatrical than a passion for gambling—all intensity is withdrawn into the interior, towards the internal operation of the rule, toward the difference of stage and spectacle that is open to view. The slightest dramatic intrusion of the gaze plunges ceremony into aesthetics, which thereby becomes the source of a pleasure; but ceremony is not of the order of pleasure, it is of the order of power, which it possesses by virtue of the immanence, in each of its signs and actors, of its development, and not by virtue of some kind of transcendence of aesthetic judgement.

Ceremony has the racial and ritual beauty of Japanese faces, in contrast to the reflexive and idealized aesthetics of our Western faces. Our Western beauty is related either to characteristics of nature and expression (character beauty) or to characteristics of fashion (the dominance of successive ideals and models, idealization of such a trait at such a time, etc.). Naturalized and idealized, it presupposes a distinction between beautiful and ugly (more recently, even, a rather ferocious blackmail by beauty). Oriental traits, on the contrary—without considering that they emphasize the face less and imply more of a gestural ceremony of the whole body—are racial, therefore arbitrary and conventional, in opposition to our naturalist and expressionist aesthetic; but they suddenly acquire a much more extraordinary beauty, that of a ritual morphology that is the same for all. No distinction: the same beauty plays on the faces of men and women, and somehow no one is ugly, because they all

receive their outline from the same destiny. Compared to this, Western beauty, with its individuation according to hybrid models, seems extremely vulgar. The play of morphological signifiers of race comes out far ahead of the signified aesthetic values of our culture.

Ceremonial beauty is not that of the subject, just as the intensity of the game is not that of affect or desire. The ceremonial game is broken up as well by moral law or by desire.

Today we place the moral law above signs. The play of conventional forms is deemed hypocritical and immoral: we oppose it with “the politeness of the heart” or even the radical impoliteness of desire. We believe in exchange and in the sincerity of exchange, and in a natural truth of feelings and affects. We believe in a hidden truth of rapports of force whose expressive superstructure would be signs, always suspected of subverting reality and mystifying consciousness. We believe in a hidden sexual truth of the body, this body being nothing more than a surface for decipherment. We believe in the primacy of an informal energy, or of a depth of meaning (the law inscribed deep in people’s hearts) whose purpose is to make its way through the surface confusion of signs. And we’re ready to transgress established codes to make the Law and Truth shine forth in their splendor.

It’s true that etiquette and politeness (and ceremony in general) are no longer what they once were. But it’s because we want to give etiquette meaning that we give it affectation. It’s because we want to substitute the necessity of the Law for the arbitrariness of the rule that the signs of etiquette become arbitrary conventions. We could—we might as well—saddle the rules of chess with moral reprobation. Now etiquette and politeness—what there was of them in a ceremonial order that is no longer our own—do not even

have as a purpose, any more than rituals do, to temper the initial violence of rapports, to dispel threats and aggressiveness (holding out one's hand to show that one is not armed, etc.). As if there were some finality in the civility of mores: this is our hypocrisy, imputing everywhere and always a moralizing function for exchanges. But *the law inscribed in heaven is not at all one of exchange*. It's rather the pact of alliance and seductive connections.

A seductive connection is one that avoids the promiscuity of cause and effect. Signs don't draw up a contract of exchange with each other, but a pact of alliance. Now, here does there reign a law of meaning, but only the interconnection of appearances. The heavens too, with their turning signs, are really arcs of alliance where the constellations are linked and arrayed as for a ceremonial destiny. Being born under a sign is not at all to interpret it or to make it signify according to its meaning: it is affiliating with it, forming an alliance with it, recognizing its power of predestination. It's not a matter of believing or disbelieving, any more than with the signs of politeness and etiquette: the mistake is always in giving meaning to what has none. Destiny—an ineluctable and recurrent unfolding of signs and appearances—has become for us a strange and unacceptable form. We no longer want a destiny. We want a history. But ceremony was the image of destiny.

There is no way to rehabilitate etiquette as a social function. When it is no more than that, it is in effect ridiculous and absurd, as with the resurrection of yoga as psychodietetic discipline or the recycling of martial arts in Bejart's choreography. The rights of the individual, his or her drives, free expression, and the liberation of speech have put an end to this futile ceremonial and to the hypocrisy of signs. Bravo!

However, this unleashing of truth, this triumph of sincerity in all its forms, also consecrates the end of illusion, of the power of illusion. Illusion in the literal sense of an initiation to the rule, to a superior agreement and convention in which something other than the real is at stake. The game is based on this possibility for every system to overflow its own reality principle and to be refracted in another logic. This is the secret of illusion, and what is at stake is always to rescue this vital dimension. Just like the eighteenth-century magician who had invented an automaton that could imitate human actions so perfectly that he was obliged on stage to “automatize” himself, to imitate mechanical imperfection precisely in order to save the game, to preserve the infinitesimal difference that made the form of illusion possible: if the two of them had been equally perfect, all seduction would have vanished.

What we call art, theatre, language have worked for centuries to save illusion in this sense, that is, to maintain the tiny distance that makes the real play with its own reality, that plays with the disappearance of the real while exalting its appearance, and to rescue this ironic rule of the game. In this sense they have kept something of ceremony and ritual in the violence they do to the real. It is in art (and certainly not in what we today call ceremony: monuments to the dead, giving out prizes, Olympic Games, etc.) that something of this ceremonial and initiatory power has been preserved, even though considerably weakened. It is there that a strategy of appearances has been conserved, that is, a mastery of apparitions and disappearances, and, in particular, the sacrificial mastery of the eclipse of the real.

Certainly our current interpretation of the game goes in the opposite direction. Our ideal vision of the game is that of the child; *paideia*, free spontaneity and wild creativity, the expression of a

pure nature, before the time of Law and repression. The animal game as opposed to the ceremonial game. But we know that the bird does not sing for its own pleasure, nor does the child play this way. Even in the most “frenzied” games, the charm of recurrence, of ritual, of meticulous unfolding, the invention of rules and complicity in observance, are what makes for the intensity and simplicity of child’s play. The scansion of the *fort-da*, for example, could easily mean the conjuration of the mother’s absence, but it’s also first of all a kind of ceremony, a control and mastery of appearance and disappearance. The supposition of fantasy puts an end to the originality of this form, since it gives it a meaning—it likewise ends the seduction proper to play, which is precisely only a matter of appearances.

The secret is made up of the annihilation of causes and the burial of ends in the organized order of appearances alone: the Rule of Appearances and Disappearances.

Now, ceremonies were established in order to regulate appearance and disappearance. What has always fascinated people is the double miracle of the apparition of things and of their disappearance. What people have always wanted to conserve is control over them and over their rule: that of birth and death, but also of the eclipse of the stars, the rapture of passion, and the revolving of the natural cycle. It is only our modern culture that has capitulated to this form of obligation and entrusted everything to that informed and formless form of freedom called chance, or to that inductive/deductive form of connection called necessity.

Today, after having staked everything on the mode of production and having exhausted its illusion, we are faced with a mode of appearance and disappearance while no longer possessing any ceremonial mastery. Our time refuses the charm of appearance and

disappearance, just as it rejects the artifice and sacrifice which alone can guarantee their sovereignty. The entire order of production was established to make an order of the apparition of things impossible, to prevent them from coming into existence too suddenly, even before they have the right to exist or to have a meaning.

Already here, even before arriving—this, however, is how things really happen to us: under the visage (or mask) of pure appearance. Banality itself can take on this face of pure appearance, and it can then become a destiny once more, that is, a mode of simultaneous appearance and disappearance.

Today, in order to justify the apparition of things, we are reduced to invoking a productive energy, an energy of drives—for death itself, we are reduced to invoking the death drive. But the search for control over the mode of disappearance is the opposite of the death drive, and has, in fact, nothing to do with it.

Our fundamental destiny is not to exist and survive, as we think: it is to appear and disappear. That alone seduces and fascinates us. That alone is scene and ceremony. We mustn't believe that it is up to chance to make things appear and disappear, our own task being to make them last or to give them meaning. Nothing is less likely than chance to bring about the scene where things have the luxury of disappearing: chance can only lead to statistical extermination. Nothing is less capable than chance of making something appear: for something really to appear, surging up to the reign of appearances, there must be seduction. For something to really disappear, to resolve into its appearance, there must be a ceremony of metamorphosis.

The Peking Opera: all Chinese theatre, whether it is in battles, or in love, or in the game of signs and flags, is a staging of the dual

felinity of bodies, actions, voices and movements, a perpetual enlacement at the minimal distance of doubling. Bodies are mobile and acrobatic mirrors of each other. Clothes, jewelry, fans brush against each other in a spiral dance; the weapons do not touch, but brush against each other violently, describing an empty space into which one cannot cross (that of the darkness of the dueling episode, of battle or seduction in the episodes of war and love, of water in the story of the boatman and the girl, where the entire space of the river is made physically manifest in the twin undulation of their two bodies—as far from each other as the length of the invisible boat, voices and bodies alternating in a duel where, in nothing more than the ceremonial space of their arrangement, the whole danger of the crossing is evoked). Nor is there anything more beautiful than this nocturnal duel where bodies search for but cannot find each other, describing with precision and violence the empty space of shadow, rendering palpable the darkness that separates them and the complicity, made of this reversibility of each of their movements, that unites them.

Everything is arranged: felinity, avoidance, advance, retreat, confrontation, the whirling frenzy of the bodies, their sudden immobility; nothing is left to a letting-go, to improvisation: everything is linked and connected, but never with a connection of meaning—always a connection of appearances. Perfection is attained in the theater when it finds this marvellous mobility, this aerial readiness, this felinity of appearances where they link up so effortlessly. Felinity, in the animal also, in the animal above all, is the sovereign interconnection of body and movement. Here, in this theater, felinity delivers signs from the weight of meaning—they can then play in a limitless mobility, and even culminate in

absolute immobility where space becomes frozen in adversity, in the enlacement at the summit of two dual forces.

Combats are never confrontations, rapports of force, but strategems, that is to say the agonistic illustration of a ruse, of a non-frontal violence, of a parallel and mobile strategy. Every body duplicates the movement of the other, draws itself as a lure where the other, petrified, finds only the void. Each one triumphs by appearance, by sending back to the other the appearance of his strength. But each one knows that triumph is not definitive, *for no one will ever occupy* the blind spot around which the battle is arrayed. Wanting to occupy it, wanting to take the empty space of strategem (like wanting to annex the empty heart of truth), is madness and an absolute misunderstanding of the world as play and ceremony.

This is, however, what our Western theatre does when it substitutes the speculative mirror of psychology for the dual reversibility of bodies and gestures. Bodies and signs collide because they have lost their ceremonial *aura* (Benjamin). The difference can be felt even in the movements of crowds and masses: while in the Western space of the subway, the city, the market, people bump against each other, fighting for space, or at best avoid each other's trajectories, in an aggressive promiscuity, the crowds in the Orient, or in an Arab casbah, know how to move differently, glide with presentiment (or consideration), care, even in a tight space, the interstitial spaces the meat-cutter of the *Chuang-Tzu* was talking about, through which his blade passes effortlessly. And this is not a question of boundaries between bodies that we make an effort to demarcate by "free" spaces or individual territories; it is the consequence of a ceremonial space, of a sacred space of arrangement that also controls the way bodies appear to each other. Ceremony is a tactile universe, made to maintain bodies at the right distance, which is that of regulated gestures

and appearance, and to make this distance felt. Two bodies that bump and collide are obscene and impure. Two things that enter into direct contact, whatever they are, be it two words or two signs, two things that couple with no formal process involved, are impure. Their promiscuity is like that of cadavers on the ground, with only excrement between them. There must be discrimination; otherwise the world becomes impoverished, wretched and violent in a perfectly futile way: in confusion.

Dress serves this purpose—not fashion in its *differential* system, but dress in its power of *discrimination* from “nature.” Fashion is a form of liberation of bodies and clothes in a play of combinations which becomes ever more random. Dress involves, on the other hand, an immovable ceremonial constraint. It is part of the tactile, immanent, initiatory universe of the ceremony. (With animals, plumage, for example, is even a part of the genetic patrimony, the reason why animals have been man’s model for the ceremonial order and not at all of the “natural” order.)

Fashion relates to the transcendent, modern, mobile, exoteric universe of looking and representation. It arises from a caprice of the desire for forms, from an aesthetic and political desire for distinction—the signs of fashion are also distinctive, and operate according to a code which is the *universal* code of fashion, thus entering into the concert of modern subjectivity, opposing the archaic, timeless, discriminatory rigor of ornament. (Fashion can certainly assume the form of a collective incantation, but it is never the sacrificial act of a group, as is ceremony. Even infinitely varied, it results fundamentally from a process of confusion and promiscuity of all possible forms.) These same forms that were ceremonial have fallen into the system of fashion; we mustn’t, however, confuse them.

No confusion, no promiscuity. Theory is just like ceremony. The role of the latter—or of all rituals, whatever kind they may be—is certainly not to conjure away some “original violence”—liturgy is not a catharsis! That is the misunderstanding, as old as functionalism, of all the idealists of original violence, of all the bleeding hearts of anthropology. Nor is it the purpose of theory to render concepts dialectical and universal: on the contrary, it is both ceremony and theory that are violent; both are produced to prevent things and concepts from touching indiscriminately, to create discrimination, and remake emptiness, to redistinguish what has been confused. Struggling against the viviparous obscenity of the confusion of ideas, struggling against the promiscuity of concepts—that is theory (when it is radical), and ceremony too has never done anything else, when it separates the initiated from the uninitiated (for ceremony is always initiatory), when it distinguishes between what connects according to the rule and what doesn’t (for ceremony is always organizing), between what is exalted and destroyed according to its very appearance and that which is produced only as meaning. Ceremony is always sacrificial.

When signs no longer represent a destiny, but a history, then they are no longer ceremonial. When behind them lurk sociology, semiology, psychoanalysis, they are no longer rituals. They have lost that power of metamorphosis immanent to the act of ceremony. They are closer to the truth, but they have lost the power of illusion. They are closer to the real, to our scene of the real, but they have lost their theatre of cruelty.

neither the double nor the repressed of the subject, neither its fantasy nor its hallucination, neither its mirror nor its reflection—it has its own strategy and holds the key to the rules of a game, impenetrable to the subject, not because they are deeply mysterious, but because they are infinitely ironic.

It is objective irony that lies in wait for us, the irony of the fulfillment of the object without regard for the subject or its alienation. In the phase of alienation, it is subjective irony that triumphs; it is the subject that constitutes an insoluble challenge to the blind world that surrounds him. Subjective irony, ironic subjectivity, is the essence of a world of interdiction, Law and desire. The power of the subject lies in its promise of fulfillment, whereas the sphere of the object is the order of what *has been* fulfilled, and from which, for this very reason, it is impossible to escape.

We confuse the fatal with the return of the repressed (what is inescapable is desire), but the order of fatality is antithetical to that of repression. What is inescapable is not desire, but the ironic presence of the object, its indifference and indifferent connections, its challenge, its seduction, and its disobedience to the symbolic order (and therefore also of the subject's unconscious, if he had one). What is inescapable, in a word, is the principle of Evil.

The subject obeys our metaphysics, which has always tried to distill Good and Evil. The object, however, is translucent to evil. This is why it shows—mischievously, diabolically—its voluntary servitude; bends willingly, like nature, to any law we impose upon it; and disobeys all legislation. And when I speak of the object and its profound duplicity, I speak of all of us and our political and social order. The whole problem of voluntary servitude should be reexamined in this light, not to resolve it but to sound out the

enigma: obedience, in effect, is a banal strategy, which doesn't need to be explained, for it secretly contains—all obedience secretly contains—a fatal disobedience to the symbolic order.

This is how a principle of Evil exists, not as a mystical process and transcendence, but as a hide-out for the symbolic order—as the theft, the rape, the receiving of stolen goods and the ironic embezzlement of the symbolic order. This is how the object is transparent to the principle of Evil. Unlike the subject, it is a poor conductor of the symbolic order, but a good conductor of the fatal—that is to say of a pure objectivity, sovereign and incorrigible, immanent and enigmatic.

Furthermore, it is not Evil that is interesting, it's the spiral of worsening. For the subject clearly reflects, to its dismay, the Evil principle in its mirror; but the object wants to be worse, and demands the worst. It is proof of a more radical negativity, namely, that if everything finally disobeys the symbolic order, it's because everything was subverted from the very beginning.

Even before being produced, the world was seduced. A strange precession which today still weighs on all of reality. The world has been refuted at its source—so it is impossible for it ever to be verified. Negativity, whether historical or subjective, is nothing: the truly diabolical, even in thought, is original subversion.

Opposed to the utopia of The Last Judgement, complimentary to that of the original baptism, we find the vertigo of simulation, the Luciferian rapture of the eccentricity of the beginning and the end.

This is why the gods can only live and hide in the inhuman, in objects and animals, in the sphere of silence and objective brutishness, and not in the sphere of man, which is that of language and subjective brutishness. The God-Man is an absurdity. A god who

rejects the ironic mask of the inhuman, who emerges from the bestial metaphor, from the objective metamorphosis where he incarnated in silence the principle of Evil, in order to don a soul and a face, assumes at the same time the hypocritical psychology of the human.

We need to be respectful of the inhuman. This is the way of certain cultures, which we call fatalist, as a way of condemning them without trial, because they found their commandments on the side of the inhuman, on the side of the stars, or of an animal god, of constellations or faceless divinities. A grand choice, that of a faceless divinity. Nothing is less like our own modern and technical iconolatry.

Metaphysics only allows good rays to filter in, and wants to make the world into the mirror of the subject (who has already passed through a mirror phase). Metaphysics wants a world of forms distinct from their doubles, their shadows, their images: this is the principle of Good. But the object is always the fetish, the false, the *feiticho*, the factitious, the lure, everything that incarnates the abominable confusion of the thing with its magical and artificial double; and that no religion of transparency and the mirror will ever be able to resolve: that is the principle of Evil.

When I speak of the object and its fatal strategies, I'm speaking also of people and their inhuman strategies. For example, a human being can find in a vacation a greater boredom than in everyday life—a redoubled boredom, because it is made up of all the elements of happiness and distraction. The important point is the predestination of vacations to boredom, the bitter and triumphal foreboding that there's no escaping this. How could we suppose that people were going to disavow their daily life and look for an alternative to it? On the contrary, they'll make a destiny out of it:

intensify it while seeming to do the opposite, plunge into it to the point of ecstasy, seal the monotony of it with an even greater monotony. This hyperbanality is the equivalent of fatality.

If one doesn't understand this, then one understands nothing of this collective brutishness, which is a grand act of self-surpassing. I'm not joking: people are not looking for amusement; instead they want to find a fatal distraction. Boredom is not the problem—the essential point is the increase of boredom; increase is salvation and ecstasy. It could mean the ecstatic deepening of anything, even the increase of oppression and abjection that works like the liberating ecstasy of abjection—just as the absolute commodity works like the liberating form of the commodity. This is the only solution to the problem of “voluntary servitude.” Furthermore there is no liberation but this one: in the deepening of negative conditions. All forms that tend to project a dazzling and miraculous liberty are only revolutionary homilies. Liberating logic is basically understood only by a few; essentially it is fatal logic that wins out.

Another form of fundamental cynicism: this will to spectacle and illusion, opposed to all will for knowledge and power: tenacious, deep in man's heart, it haunts nonetheless the process of events. There is, as it were, a drive for pure event, objective information, the most secret facts and thoughts, to be commuted into spectacle, to attain ecstasy in a scene instead of being produced as something really happening. To occur is necessary, to be in ecstasy is absolutely vital.

Things can only happen in this excessive manner, that is to say, not in the hold of representation, but in the magic of their effect—there only they appear great and do themselves the luxury of existing. We think of nature as indifferent, and it certainly is to the passions and enterprises of man; but it isn't perhaps indifferent to

the fact of making a spectacle of itself in natural disasters. This is something of a parable, but it's here only to signify this passion of passions, simulating passion, seductive passion, subversive passion, that means that things are meaningless unless transfigured by this illusion, this derision, this production which is not at all a representation, but their prodigious and eccentric form, the will to disdain their causes and to lose ourselves in their effects, and particularly in the effects of their disappearance. Prodigious form that moralists have always condemned, for here is where things cynically subvert themselves from their beginnings and their ends, in a distant echo of original sin.

Furthermore, it is this eccentricity that protects us from the real and its disastrous consequences. That things exhaust themselves in their spectacle—in a magic and artificial fetishism—is the distortion that serious minds will always oppose, in their utopian expurgation of the world in order to deliver it exact, intact, and authentic for the day of Last Judgement. But this spectacle that the moralists disapprove of is possibly the lesser evil. For God knows where unleashed meaning would lead to when it refuses to produce itself as appearance.

Even Revolution can happen only if its spectacle is possible: what the “beautiful souls” deplore is that the media are putting an end to the real event. But if we consider the problem of nuclear annihilation, we may realize the possibility that it is its distillation in simulated everyday panic, in the haunting and spectacular thrills that the media treat our fears to, that protects us from the nuclear clash, and not the balance of terror (there is no strategic guarantee in deterrence, nor, furthermore, any survival instinct of the species). What protects us is that, for nuclear

holocaust, the event threatens dangerously to deny us all hope of spectacle. *That is why it won't happen.* Humanity can accept its own physical disappearance, but it cannot accept to sacrifice its spectacle (unless it succeeds in finding a spectator in another world). The drive to spectacle is more powerful than the survival instinct, we can count on that.⁹

If the morality of things lies in their sacrosanct use-value, then long live the immorality of the atom and of nuclear arms, which cause even them to be submitted to the ultimate and cynical event of the spectacle. Long live the secret rule of the game that causes everything to disobey the symbolic law! What will save us is neither the rational principle nor use-value. Rather, it's the immoral principle of the spectacle, the ironic principle of Evil.

Absorption in this secondary effect is a kind of passion and a kind of fatal will. Likewise, no life can be conceived of outside the framework of a second chance. The design of a life cannot be given except by the vibrant certainty of a necessary return, sooner or later—a little like the resurrection of the body, but without the Last Judgement—the reappearance of certain moments or faces that have once been. These will come back, for they can only disappear on the horizon of your life, whose trajectory, subverted precisely by events, takes the unconscious curve necessary to give them the chance of a second life, or of a definitive return. Then only will they really have taken place. Then only they'll have been lost or won.

9. Of course, this is not the spectacle that the Situationists denounced as the acme of alienation and the ultimate limit of capitalism. Neither would it be instead the opposite, since here it is a matter of the victorious strategy of the object, its own mode of subversion, and not a way in which it is subverted. We would be much closer, in fact, with the charm of the commodity in Baudelaire.

From a certain moment on, these second comings comprise the very design of existence, where consequently nothing happens by chance; it's the first coming—which is not meaningful in itself and loses itself in the banal obscurity of living—that happens by chance. Only by redoubling can it make of itself a true event, attaining the character of a fatal happening. It's like an astrological sign that is meaningful only when accompanied by its ascendant: the sign itself is nothing; accompanied, it becomes ineluctable.

Once certain events of a life have thus had their second chance, once the cycle has brought them back once and once only, that life is completed. When a life knows no second coming of this kind, it ends before having begun.

The fatal is there somewhere, in that direction. In this sense, the old heresies were right. Everyone has the right to a second birth: the true one. Everyone is predestined: not by astral decree, but by internal immanence in our own life, to the necessary return of such events. This is why, chance having been abolished, the Last Judgement is useless.

This is why the theory of predestination is infinitely superior to that of freedom of the soul. Predestination eliminates from life all that is only destined—all that, having happened only once, is only accidental, while what happens a second time becomes fatal; but it also gives to life the intensity of these secondary events, which have, as it were, the depth of a previous existence.

There is neither form nor meaning to a first encounter, still stained with misunderstanding and banality. Fatality only comes afterwards, by the current effect of this previous life. And there is a sort of will and energy in this occurrence, which no one knows anything about, and which isn't the resurgence of a hidden order.

Not at all. It's in the full light of day that certain things come to their assigned existence.

If the stars rose and set in just any order, heaven itself would be meaningless. It's the recurrence of their trajectory that makes for the heavenly event. And it's the recurrence of certain fatal peripeties that makes for the event of a life.

At the end of all that, if the object is ingenious, if the object is fatal, what can we do about it?

After the art of survival, the ironic art of disappearance? The subject has always dreamed of this, a dream inverse to its dream of totalization, and the one has never been able to erase the other. Quite the contrary. Its failure today awakens passions that are much more subtle.

At the heart of banal strategies is the fiery desire of fatal strategies.

Nothing can guarantee us a fatality, even less a strategy. What is more, the conjunction of these two terms is paradoxical: how could there be fatality if there is strategy? That's just the point: the enigma is that fatality is at the heart of every strategy. It's what peeks through the heart of more banal strategies. It's the object, whose fatality would be a strategy something like the rule of another game. Basically, the object mocks the laws we attach to it; it would rather figure in our calculations as a sarcastic variable, and leave it to the equations to verify themselves. But the rules of its game, the conditions according to which it accepts playing? No one knows them, and they can change without notice.

No one knows what a strategy is. There are not enough means in the world for us to be able to dispose of ends. And, therefore, no one is capable of articulating a final process. God himself is forced to employ a trial-and-error method. The interesting thing about

this is the inexorable logical process that is visible here, by which the object is taken in the very game that we wanted to make it play—doubling the ante somehow, escalating the bidding on the strategic limits it will tolerate, installing thereby a strategy that doesn't have its own ends: a “playful” strategy that stills the play of the subject, a fatal strategy in that the subject thereby succumbs to the surpassing of its own objectives.

We are accomplices in this excess of finality that is there in the object (this can be the excess of meaning, and therefore the impossibility of deciphering a word that plays the game of meaning all too well). We invent all these strategies in the hope of having them result in the unexpected event. The real we invent wholly in the hope of seeing it result in a prodigious artifice. From any object we hope for a blind response that hampers our projects. From strategy we expect control. From seduction we look for surprise.

Seduction is fatal. It's the effect of a sovereign object that recreates in you an original confusion and seeks to surprise you. Fatality, in turn, is seductive, like the discovery of a hidden rule. The discovery of a hidden rule of the game is dazzling, and compensates us in advance for the cruelest losses.

Likewise with the joke. If I look for a fatal connection in language, I fall on the joke, which is itself the *dénouement* of language immanent to language (that is the fatal: the same sign presiding over a life's crystallization and its resolution, at the knotting of the intrigue and its *dénouement*). In language become pure object, irony (of the *Witz**) is the objective form of this *dénouement*. Everywhere, as in the *Witz*, redoubling and escalating the stakes are spirited forms of denouement.

Everything must unfold in a fatal and ingenious way, just as everything was caught from the start in an original subversion.

Even predestination is a form of ironic subversion of fatality. Chance is also one. What's the use of trying to establish chance as an objective process, if it is an ironic one? Of course it exists, but against all science, in the irony of the aleatory, and even at the molecular level. And of course fatality exists too, simultaneously—there's no paradox involved in this. The difference is that the irony of fatality is greater than the irony of chance, which just makes it more tragic and more seductive.

It's true that this is a difficult and obscure route: to side with the object, to take up the cause of the object. To find another rule, another axiom: nothing mystical in this, nothing of the other-worldly delirium of a subjectivity trapped and escaping headlong into a paroxysmal inventory. But simply to delineate this other logic, unravel those other strategies, leave the field open to objective irony. That also is a challenge—eventually it threatens absurdity, and runs the risk of what it describes—but the risk is to be taken. The hypothesis of a fatal strategy must itself be fatal, too.

If there be a morality, it too must be engaged in the eccentric cycle of its effects, must itself be hypermoral, like the real is hyper-real, must be no longer a moral stasis, but a moral ecstasy, must itself be a special effect.

Lévi-Strauss claimed that the symbolic order had left us, yielding to history. Today, says Canetti, history itself has withdrawn. What remains but to pass on the side of the object, and on the side of its eccentric and precious effects, of its fatal effects (fatality is only the absolute liberty of effects)? Semiorrhage.

Today, now that all critical radicality has become useless, now that all negativity seems resolved in a world that pretends to realize itself, and now that the critical spirit has found its summer home

in socialism, and the effects of desire are largely depleted—what remains but to bring things back to their enigmatic ground zero? Now the enigma is inverted: once it was the Sphinx that posed men the question of man, the question Oedipus thought he answered, that we all thought we answered. Today it's man that poses to the Sphinx—the inhuman—the question of the inhuman, of the fatal, of the indifference of the world toward our affairs, of its fickleness toward objective laws. The object (the Sphinx), subtler than man, hardly answers. But it's certain nevertheless that in disobeying laws, in unravelling desire, it answers secretly to some enigma. What remains but to side with this enigma?

Everything can be summed up in this: let's believe for a single instant the hypothesis that there is a fatal and enigmatic bias in the order of things.

In any case, there is something stupid about our current situation. There's something stupid in the raw event, to which destiny, if it exists, could not be insensible. There's something stupid in the current forms of truth and objectivity that a superior irony could spare us. Everything is expiated in one way or another. Everything is headed somewhere. Truth only complicates things.

And if the Last Judgement consists, as everyone knows, for each of us, in saving and eternalizing a moment of our lives, and one only, with whom do we share this ironic end?



Jean Baudrillard

Translated by Philippe Beitchman & W.G.J. Niesluchowski
Introduction by Dominic Pettman



Two alternatives, equally possible: nothing has happened yet, our unhappiness comes from the fact that nothing has really begun (liberation, revolution, progress)—finalist utopia. The other eventuality is that everything has already happened. We are already beyond the end. All that was metaphor has already materialized, collapsed into reality. This is our destiny: the end of the end. We are in a transfinite universe.

Fatal Strategies was first published in France in 1983, two years after Baudrillard's groundbreaking *Simulations*, with its dizzying descriptions of a world in which original and copy, real and false have become indistinguishable. *Fatal Strategies* takes us one step further with a paradoxical question: if plans of action have become ineffective, can the hyperreal world we live in be challenged by another kind of logic that would come with the inevitability of fate?

Outwardly geared to progress and production, ruled by linearity, cause and effect, and accumulation, contemporary societies remain unaware that they have already outgrown their *raison d'être* and finalities. In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard is looking for a rule immanent to the system, a fatal game (more final than final) capable of dismantling, challenging, and reversing the world of simulation. Bypassing subjectivity in favor of an "objective irony," Baudrillard is here reinventing theory as narration, a playful, provocative proposition, and all the more implacable for that.

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) was a philosopher, sociologist, cultural critic, and theorist of postmodernity who challenged all existing theories of contemporary society with wit and rigor. An outsider to the French intellectual establishment, he is internationally renowned as a twenty-first century visionary, reporter, and provocateur. His *Simulations* instantly became a cult classic and made him a controversial voice in the world of politics, philosophy, and art.

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